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The Religious Situation in Israel

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 23, 1971)

Were I to condense my three-month's observation and assessment of the religious situation in Israel into one brief statement, I would say that despite the many negative features, the prospects for creative change and improvement are splendid; however, despite – or, perhaps, because of – all these promises, it is disappointing that so much more could be done than is being done at present.

With all the beauty and naturalness of religion in Israel, there are, to be sure, occasional anti-religious expressions that are somewhat disturbing. It was reported to me quite casually, for instance, that in one mixed religious-non-religious neighborhood, non-observant children just recently come from Latin America often shout at their observant peers, “Shabbos,” the derisive term for Sabbath-observers. It is depressing that, in the Jewish state, Sabbath observers should find it difficult to obtain employment in certain branches of the communications media, especially television, and in the arts; in Israel one does not even have a law to which to appeal as we do in New York State. One often hears bitter criticism of religious Jews because Yeshiva students are exempt from the army. This is unfortunate, because it does not take into consideration the fact that the numbers involved are rather small; that Yeshiva students are exempt from military service in most countries in the Free World; that the Yeshivot face a severe problem because a three-year interruption does, indeed, make it difficult to resume Torah studies upon the discharge of the young man from the army. Most important, the criticism does not take into consideration the fact that the so-called “modern Yeshivot,” those that recognize the State and feel an obligation to and an involvement in it, have devised a system called hesder, according to which the student will spend his period of

army service alternating with study at the Yeshiva. Yet, it remains a severe problem, and unquestionably the religious groups have not done enough in order to meet the criticism and obviate it. Right or wrong, the result of the exemption is a hillul ha-shem.

There are also moral problems in Israel. Some of them are social and economic in origin, the result of the tremendous displacement of fairly primitive Jewish communities who, cut off from their traditional mooring, find themselves lost in Israel. They are, therefore, subject to many of the moral ills which are to be sociologically expected. Worse yet, Westernization seems to be going along at full pace, and Westernization means Americanization, in this case – the import of all the filth and corruption and decadence which have marked our country these past several years. Almost all of the degrading Broadway nude shows have been staged in Tel Aviv, and Israeli versions added to it, a kind of “second generation filth,” missing none of the various versions and varieties of obscenity.

One meets with a surprising ignorance of religion in Israel. I spoke to a group of distinguished men and women, including leading members of Knesset, journalists, and war heroes, and in the course of my remarks I mentioned Rosh Hodesh. Afterwards, one of the participants told me that I should have explained what I was talking about, for a number of people did not know what Rosh Hodesh is! And when “Geshet” ran its seminar for some of the most brilliant high school students from non-religious schools from Tel Aviv, Haifa, and Jerusalem, we discovered that we had to do exactly what we must do when running similar seminars in the United States for non-observant teenagers: we had to announce the pages in the Siddur, show them the proper posture, explain what the prayers were all

about. Except for their knowledge of Hebrew, they were not essentially different from American children.

Yet that very fact in itself – ignorance -- is by some paradoxical calculus, a source of optimism. For to the very largest extent, the agonizing religious problems of Israel are not usually the result of intrinsic hostility and inner antagonism to religion, but rather extrinsic, imposed upon us from without, the result of such factors as ignorance, the lingering inheritance of galut and galut-ideologies, and the cheap mimicry which pretends to art and aesthetics in Israel as in the rest of the world today. But as long as it is external, it can be gotten rid of.

Thus, we read today that God promises Israel its redemption in the words והוצאתי אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים, “I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt.” Rashi adds three apparently superfluous words: טורח משא מצרים, the trouble of the load or burden of Egypt. Apparently, what Rashi meant to explain was the strange Biblical preposition מתחת, “from under.” The troubles that Egypt visited upon us were like a load placed on our backs, they were external – and what comes from without can be pushed outside again; what is superimposed is something from which we may be redeemed. The same might be said about the religious problems in Israel. They are many, they are difficult, they are perplexing. But it is not true that Jews are basically antagonistic to Torah. And if so, we are right in the hope that the טורח משא מצרים will yet be taken off our shoulders.

One cannot discuss religion in Israel today without mentioning the Six Day War. The war was in itself a turning point, and it is being thought through and felt through to this day. I confess that I came thinking that the effects had worn off, and that in its place had come apathy, indifference, and even cynicism. I feared that Israelis were allowing their basic self-confidence to turn their interpretation of the war into a kind of arrogance, a pharaonic superciliousness, saying, as we were warned by Moses (Dt. 8:17) כחי ועוצם ידי עשה לי את החיל, הזה, “my strength and power alone created for me all this wealth”; or as the Pharaoh of a later Biblical period said, in today’s Haftorah, לי יאורי ואני עשיתיני, “The Nile is mine and I have made it (or: myself).” I brought these biases and apprehensions with me, determined to expose and discuss them, at a lecture I was invited to deliver at the מדרשה צבאית לחינוך, the Military Academy for Education. Here, at a special seminar which is attended for about two

or three weeks a year by senior officers, from the rank of Colonel or Major and up, I addressed 25 such officers – who were, to my American eyes, frighteningly young. I told them that, speaking as a religious Jew, I was afraid that their interpretation of the war was more in accord with what I described as Pharaoh’s thinking than Jewish thinking; and that were I to speak as a secularist, the same argument would be enunciated as a charge of militarism raising its head in Israel, both in its military establishment and its civil society. I exaggerated the argument, and my extravagance was meant to elicit their responses. I was curious. And my curiosity was more than satisfied when they rose as one man and vigorously denied, with great passion, that Israelis, including their military leaders and heroes, believe that all credit is due to them. They all indicated that, somehow, by some means, the victory implied something other than Israel’s military ability and Arab ineffectualness, and something more than sheer good luck. I am not satisfied that this is the final interpretation they ought to have. But I am enormously pleased, because I find in this attitude tremendous religious potentialities. I agree with Prof. Heschel that “radical amazement” is the underlying mood of the religious individual. As long as Israelis wonder, as long as there is astonishment, as long as there is this amazement at what happened, even if they have not yet formulated the amazement in religious categories, the possibilities are there. With such attitudes, it is simply wrong to categorize the “average” Israeli as “non-religious.” They are perhaps still “non-observant,” but not really “non-religious.”

According to the Jerusalem Talmud, the reason that we drink four cups of wine at the Passover Seder is to accord with the four synonyms of redemption which we read of in today’s Sedra: והוצאתי, והצלתי, וגאלתי, ולקחתי. However, the commentaries ask: Why, then, do we pour a fifth cup of wine at the Seder, that known as כוסו של אליהו? And why do we not drink it? The “Netziv,” the great teacher from Volozhin, explained that the fifth cup comes as a symbol of another synonym used in the same passage, the verse, וידעתם כי אני ה’ אלקיכם המוציא אתכם מתחת סבלות מצרים, “And ye shall know that I am the Lord your God who takes you out from under the burdens of Egypt.” There are really two redemptions – the physical redemption, which is the political emancipation of the people and the spiritual redemption, which is the awareness that the first redemption came from God and was not solely the

act of man. Because it takes spiritual maturity, time, and perspective, to understand and acknowledge the וידעתם, the fifth cup, symbol of וידעתם, is designated the Cup of Elijah, for only in the days of the Messiah, for whom Elijah is the harbinger, will the full effect of וידעתם become known to mankind. We therefore put it aside and do not drink it.

I might add this: if the spiritual redemption means that the people of Israel, the subjects of this victory, will come to acknowledge at least by the sense of amazement, by the sense of standing before the ineffable and the miraculous, the intercession of God, then the greatest vindication of Israel and of God is when the enemies of Israel will come to acknowledge His victory, when Pharaoh and the Egyptians will concede that “the Lord is God.”

This has happened, in some measure of speaking, in our days too. Permit me to read to you a passage from the memoirs of a man who is not considered a friend of the State of Israel:

Egypt is in grave straits today. There is no question in my mind that Israel started the war against Egypt (in 1967). But there are a couple of things I cannot understand that happened before Israel's attack on Egypt. It is not clear to me why Egypt demanded that U Thant remove the U.N. troops from the border. These forces were a restraining force on the Israeli aggressors. I remember we voted in favor of sending a U.N. peace-keeping force to the Near East. Nor can I understand what goal Egypt thought it was pursuing when it closed the Suez Canal. Israel took advantage of these actions on Egypt's part. And another thing: if Egypt was prepared for war against Israel, then why was Israel able to crush the Egyptian army in six days? All these questions puzzle me.

Thus spake Nikita Khrushchev, in the Memoirs smuggled to the West and published throughout the Western world. He says that he does not understand these events, and that they puzzle him. He means that he is amazed by the miracle – and that the miracle-doer is the Lord, God of Israel. Khrushchev is about to say that the Lord performs miracles, even if he does not believe in Him...

Torah Judaism has great possibilities in Israel, greater than it has had in many years. But what will happen from here on depends on what we religious Jews do, whether in Israel or in America.

I am convinced that, because of the matter of self-identity as Jews which I discussed last week, the same effort extended there will achieve greater results than they

do here, although they will call for an investment of more courage and even heartache.

It is my firm belief that now is the time for the great American contribution to Israel. Every Aliyah made its contribution – the Russian, the German, the South African, the Oriental. Now is the time for American Jews to make their unique contribution, both to society in general and to religion.

This contribution must be made both by American olim and American golim, by American Jews who emigrate to Israel and to those of us who remain behind.

To an extent, Judaism is in the same position in Israel today as it was in the United States forty or fifty years ago. We American Jews who have lived through this, who can show the scars and the trophies, can now apply to Israel the lessons that we have learned and the experience we have gained in the Western diasporas.

American olim must contribute American-style congregations – though there is much wrong with our congregations; American-type rabbis – though God knows there is much that is wrong with us; decorous services, modern concepts, techniques for dealing with youth, the philosophy required to embrace living in two worlds.

And American golim, those of us who are still here, can assist in two ways. First we must help finance the American olim in their efforts, and we must inspire them by a continuing relationship with them and with all the rest of Israel. Second, we must build and improve our own institutions, so that they serve as a model in the ongoing dialogue with modernity that we must carry on both in Israel and in America.

The prophet exclaimed, מירושלים ודבר ה' תצא תורה, “For Torah shall go forth from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.”

Yet Rabbenu Tam, the grandson of Rashi and the father of the Tosafists, had no compunctions about paraphrasing the prophet and exclaiming, concerning the sages of the great Italian Jewish Centers of his day, כי מבארי תצא תורה, “that Torah will go forth from Bari and the word of the Lord from Trento.”

The hegemony of Torah for the House of Israel throughout the world can be assured only by a cooperative effort of Israeli Jewry and American Jewry. For as David said of Jerusalem: it is יחדו לה שחבורה, *a city that flourishes through cooperation.*

Jerusalem must always remain the center; but a center

must have a periphery, and only when there is a vital exchange and equilibrium between center and periphery does the circle of Jewish life expand and thrive.

So, to complete the chapter from which the last verse was taken, we say to Israel: למען אחי ורעי אדברה נא שלום בך, on behalf of our brethren and our friends throughout the world we wish only peace for you.

When You Discover You're Like No Other

Dr. Erica Brown

Imagine your world suddenly covered with frogs jumping on every surface: “Aaron held out his arm over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt” (Ex. 6:10). It would be absolutely revolting. The God of this slave people was capable of much aggravation and destruction, the Egyptians finally realized. Nevertheless, Pharaoh, in this week’s Torah reading, sent his magicians the task of replicating this plague, ironically creating even more amphibian havoc: “But the magician-priests did the same with their spells, and brought frogs upon the land of Egypt” (Ex. 8:2).

Although the replication worked, something else was not working. Pharaoh’s magicians clearly had no idea how to stop the problem they themselves created. In desperation, Pharaoh called Aaron and Moses: “Plead with God to remove the frogs from me and my people, and I will let the people go to sacrifice to God” (Ex. 8:4). Pharaoh was willing to make a concession if the plague stopped. Moses approached this request wisely. No longer would he cave into Pharaoh’s demands immediately. Moses wanted to raise the stakes by showing Pharaoh the degree to which the Israelites had the upper hand.

Moses asked Pharaoh exactly when to stop the plague: “And Moses said to Pharaoh, ‘You may have this triumph over me: for what time shall I plead on behalf of you and your courtiers and your people, that the frogs be cut off from you and your houses, to remain only in the Nile?’” (Ex. 8:5). Unlike the magicians who could create a mess but not extricate themselves from it, Moses’ God had such control that the very hour to stop the plague could be determined in advance.

Pharaoh strangely did not ask for the frogs to disappear immediately. “For tomorrow,” he replied. And [Moses] said, ‘As you say—that you may know that there is none like our God.’” Moses added a flourish that offered the

And to the Jews of the Diaspora, one who returns from Israel brings the greetings למען בית ה' אלקינו אבקשה טוב לך, on behalf of the House of the Lord our God, from which, as the Talmud taught, the Shechinah never departed throughout the centuries, we seek what is good for you.

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reason for the plagues in the first place: to show Pharaoh who was really in control. It was not enough to name God. Pharaoh had to know God. He could even set his watch to God’s signs and wonders. Seforno sums it up neatly: “In order that you will recognize the difference between what your sorcerers are able to do and what God is capable of doing.”

There is no one like God – *ain od milvado*. That is made clear in this week’s sedra, Va’era.

I only truly understood the significance of this statement when I visited Egypt myself at the tender age of nineteen. Walking through the Temple of Karnak near Luxor and the acres of ancient ruins that were a testament to the power of polytheism was the first time I glimpsed what the ancient Israelites were up against. The statues towered over me. I pondered how difficult it must have been to erect all these altars and prayer spaces and how hard it was to believe in an alternate spiritual reality. Was it my people, I wondered with each step, who were forced to construct these buildings to honor visible gods all the while holding on to an invisible God that Pharaoh failed to acknowledge?

The statement of God’s singularity and uniqueness appears elsewhere in Tanakh. In Jeremiah, we read, “There is none like You, O Lord; You are great, and great is Your name in might” (10:6). In the first book of Samuel, Hannah intones a prayer upon delivering Samuel to Shiloh: “There is no one holy like the Lord; indeed, there is no one besides You, nor is there any rock like our God” (2:2). In difficult times and in times of great joy, our people has held steadfastly to a belief in monotheism even when we suffered for it, even when no one around us believed in one God.

I believe that this iconoclasm – the capacity to challenge cherished beliefs and reigning institutional norms – rubbed off on the Jewish people as well. Believing

something no one else believes and challenging existing ways of thinking and being can also help mold the way we generate new ideas, invent new medicines, and chart new pathways in science and the arts. Could belief in a God who is like no other extend to a belief in personal human singularity as well? There is no other God. God is unique. There is no one else like me. I am unique.

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *Radical Then, Radical Now*, reminds us of this singularity: “We are not insignificant, nor are we alone. We are here because someone willed us into being, who wanted us to be, who knows our innermost thoughts, who values us in our uniqueness, whose breath we breathe and in whose arms we rest; someone in and through whom we are connected to all that is.” Uniqueness can be uncomfortable rather than reassuring. We do what others do to belong. It takes courage to imitate God by being who we were uniquely meant to be.

Gregory Berns, a professor of neurology at Emory, wrote his book *Iconoclast: A Neuroscientist Reveals How to Think Differently* to demonstrate the brain’s plasticity and ability to challenge ideas long accepted. The iconoclast is the ultimate leader because the iconoclast allows himself or herself to think and act differently. “We take for granted that our perceptions of the world are real, but they are really specters of our imagination, nothing more than biological and electrical rumblings that we believe to be real.” Berns argues that the iconoclast’s brain works on another register in three central and defining ways:

- Perception: the iconoclast sees differently than others
- Fear response: the iconoclast can tame stress responses to better control fear, and
- Social Intelligence: the iconoclast connects differently with others.

Berns also reminds us that when we create something novel we are also destroying what once existed. Fear can quickly deaden the willingness to do something new. We fear ambiguity and staying in spaces that are uncertain so we rush to convention and routine. We fear failure; if we do things the way they’ve always been done, we will minimize disappointment. We fear looking stupid or incompetent so we take no chances.

Moses, the iconoclast of Exodus, saw freedom where others saw slavery. He was able to control his fear response time and again under Pharaoh’s threats, and he was able to connect his message of salvation and justice to the people he led. Moses was initially cowered by fears of his own inadequacy. He repeatedly rejected a job he never signed up for. But then, in Pharaoh’s own chambers, Moses stood up and declared, “There is none like our God.” And in this empowering and dangerous moment, perhaps Moses discovered his own singular voice, leaving us with the gift and invitation to discover our own.

When have you challenged prevailing norms and discovered your uniqueness?

This Time for Sure

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

In this week’s parsha, we read that Pharaoh, in reaction to the plague of ‘*barad*,’ or hail, admits that he has sinned. He tells Moshe, “I sinned this time. God is the righteous One, and I and my people are wicked” (Shemos 9:27). He asks Moshe to petition God to remove the plague, and Moshe agrees to do so. However, he adds, “And as for you and your servants, I know that you are not yet fearful of the Lord, God” (9:29). Indeed, after God responded to Moshe’s prayer and removed the plague, the Torah tells us that Pharaoh returned to his previous intransigent attitude, and refused to release the Hebrew slaves. Although we have discussed, in the past, what it was that Pharaoh saw in this particular plague that led him to recognize it as God’s punishment, as well as the reason

for his failure to sustain this attitude of contrition, I would now like to focus on the wording of Pharaoh’s admission as well as on Moshe’s response, in an effort to understand why Moshe was so certain that Pharaoh’s change of heart would be short-lived.

Targum Yonasan ben Uziel says that when Pharaoh admitted his guilt and acknowledged God’s righteousness, he was doing so in regard to each one of the plagues, as well. Rabbi Avraham, son of the Rambam, also takes this approach. He says that we should not understand Pharaoh’s statement to mean that he only admitted to his guilt in regard to this particular plague, but, rather, that he was referring to all of them. Thus, Pharaoh made a general admission to his guilt for his treatment of the

slaves from the beginning. How, then, did Moshe know that Pharaoh did not yet fear God? Rabbi Avraham says that Moshe knew this only because God had told him so. In other words, Pharaoh's statement, on its face, appeared to be a genuine act of contrition, and, had God not told Moshe that Pharaoh did not truly fear Him, he would not have responded in the way that he did. Although Rabbi Avraham does not say this, it is possible that his explanation is based on his father's remarks in his Laws of repentance (6:3), that God actually removed Pharaoh's free will after he had continued to oppress the slaves and refuse to let them go. God did this, explains the Rambam, as a punishment to Pharaoh, and to show the world that when God wants to punish someone for his past deeds, He will suspend his free will and prevent him from repenting.

Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, as cited in the Torah commentary "*MiMa'amakim*," written by his student Rabbi Alexander Aryeh Mandelbaum and based on his teachings, contends that this unique punishment, as described by the Rambam, was reserved for Pharaoh because he witnessed the truth of God's power and chose to ignore it. However, Rav Aharon Kotler, in his Mishnas Rav Aharon (volume one, page 238), maintains that the lesson that the Rambam learned from Pharaoh's punishment has application to everyone. This is, he says, because the midrash, on which Rambam bases his approach, cites Biblical verses to prove its point. Although man has free will, says R. Kotler, God acts towards a person in accordance with his level of behavior. If a person follows the path of evil, divine providence will bring about circumstances that will lead him to continue on that path, to a degree that he would not have on his own. Conversely, if a person follows the correct path, observing the mitzvos of the Torah, God will help him to continue on this path, and achieve more than he would have if left completely to his own devices. This principle is encapsulated in the Talmudic statement (Yoma 29a) that if someone comes to defile himself, the path is opened for him, from heaven, and if someone comes to purify himself, he is helped, by heaven, to do so. Thus, while Pharaoh's fate bears an ominous warning for us, it also contains a positive message, which, hopefully, will act as a spur to a heightened commitment to observing the mitzvos of the Torah.

There is, as noted in Netvort to Vaeira, 5763, another approach to understanding Pharaoh's short-lived acknowledgment of his guilt. Rabbi Boruch Sorotzkin,

in his commentary HaBinah VeHaBeracha, points to the fact that Pharaoh said 'I sinned this time.' Pharaoh was focusing only on the current situation generated by the plague of barad, and viewed it in isolation from the other plagues. He only admitted that in respect to this specific plague, he had sinned, and that God was correct in punishing him. Pharaoh did not recognize that all of the other plagues were also punishments from God, and that his treatment of the slaves and his refusal to free them had been wrong from the very beginning. This is how Moshe knew that his change in attitude would not be permanent. In order for a person to really change, says Rabbi Sorotzkin, he must view events in a total perspective, consider all of his actions, and examine his entire life in order to understand how he reached his current crisis. Pharaoh did not do this, and that is why he quickly reverted to his earlier state after the plague was removed by God.

In Netvort to parshas Vaeira, 5765, I expanded on Rabbi Sorotzkin's approach and explained that the underlying factor that led to Pharaoh's treatment of the slaves, and which he failed to recognize as the cause for all the plagues, was his essential lack of gratitude and feeling of self-sufficiency. I would now like to suggest that another factor was involved, as well. Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra, in his commentary to parshas Shemos, notes that when Moshe first told Pharaoh, in the name of God, that he should release the Hebrew slaves, Pharaoh responded, "Who is God that I should heed his voice to send out Yisroel?" (Shemos 5:2). The name of God that Moshe and Pharaoh referred to was the four-letter name, sometimes referred to as the 'shem Havayah, 'or simply "HaShem" (The Name). Ibn Ezra writes that Pharaoh did recognize Elokim, which denotes the One who controls the various powers in the universe, but did not recognize Hashem. Although Ibn Ezra himself writes that this name refers to God as the God of the Hebrews, this name also implies God's unity, as we read in the declaration of faith, the Shema - "God (Hashem) is One" (Devorim 5:4 - and see Rashi there). I believe that it was Pharaoh's failure to accept the notion of the unity of God that prevented him from viewing the events in his life as a continuous unit. On Saturday night, in the Shemoneh Esreh of ma'ariv, we add a prayer for the coming week, in which we ask of God that we should be, in the days ahead, 'medubakim beyirasecha.' The common way of translating this phrase is, 'to be attached to You

through fearing You.’ However, Rav Zevi Yehudah Kook explained it to mean, ‘to be attached to ourselves through fearing You.’ By attaching ourselves to the One God, and His unity, we are able to bring together all the disparate parts of our lives and become a unified whole. When

Pharaoh told Moshe that he sinned ‘this time,’ he was, in effect, telling Moshe that he was not a unified personality. Moshe thus understood that Pharaoh had not accepted the notion of the unity of God, and, as a result he understood that Pharaoh had not truly repented.

Do you Want to Drink the Fifth Cup?

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jan 23, 2020)

At the beginning of this week’s Parsha, we have the famous Arbaah Lashonos of Geulah—*Ve-hotseisi, ve-hitsalti, ve-go’alti, ve-lakachti*. According to the Rishonim, that’s why we drink four kosos on Seder Night. Obviously, these four cups are explicitly mentioned in Shas. And obviously, they have to do with Yetsias Mitzrayim and the *pirsumei nisa*. The question is, why specifically four cups? Because there are Arbaah Lashonos of Geulah. What is interesting is that there is a big machlokes among the Geonim whether there is a requirement for an extra-Talmudic fifth kos. And our minhag is that we do have the fifth kos. We call it Kos Shel Eliyahu—we just have it on the table, but we don’t drink it. What’s the reason for this minhag?

The Raavad suggests that it’s parallel to the fifth expression of Geulah in the Torah—*ve-heiveisi eschem el ha-aretz*—referring to our going into Eretz Yisroel. The difference is that the first four are the lashonos of Geulah that have happened. It is an already accomplished goal that can never be rescinded. We are free. We are *bnei chorin* forever. We are Hashem’s special nation. We received a Torah that cannot be reversed or canceled. *Ve-heiveisi*, on the other hand, is something that hasn’t yet happened despite the long centuries and millennia of galus. Obviously, it happened 40 years after Yetzias Mitzrayim, in the days of Yehoshua bin Nun. But then they were exiled from Eretz Yisroel. They came back. But they were exiled once again. Even the Jews who left Mitzrayim didn’t make it into Eretz Yisroel—only their kids did. And when they did come, that did not last forever. Baruch Hashem we are starting to come back. And perhaps everyone reading this will decide to come back. But that’s why we call it the Kos Shel Eliyahu, because he comes to herald Mashiach, who will make that fifth kos a cup that we drink and give us *ve-heiveisi* in a way that will never be reversed.

The Netziv, though, has a different fascinating

suggestion in his *Ha-Emek Davar*. He quotes the Ra’avad and doesn’t like his explanation—he thinks that Ra’avad skipped part of the pasuk. First the pasuk says *Ve-hotseisi, ve-hitsalti, ve-go’alti, ve-lakachti eschem li le-am ve-hayisi lachem le-Eilokim*. But there is another lashon there—*vi-yadattem ki Ani Hashem Elokeichem hamotzi es’chem mitachas sivlos Mitzrayim*. Obviously, Ra’avad skipped that because it’s not in the first person, like the other four. But Netziv says: That’s the fifth lashon of Geulah—*vi-yadattem*! After all, it’s very nice that Hashem does *Ve-hotseisi, ve-hitsalti, ve-go’alti, ve-lakachti*—He does a lot of things that affect us. But ultimately, there is a limit to how much Hashem can affect us—*ha-kol biydei shomayim chutz me-yiras shomayim*. He can affect our external situation. But ultimately, in our penimius, we have to change ourselves via *vi-yadattem*. What does it mean to know *Ki Ani Hashem Elokeichem*? We have to internalize the meaning of *ve-hotseisi, ve-hitsalti, ve-go’alti, ve-lakachti*. What does it mean that we are Hashem’s special people? What does that demand from us? What does the fact that Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim change in our lives? *Vi-yadattem* is the internalization—not just knowing, like knowing a cold historical fact. How does this knowledge change what I do when I wake up tomorrow morning? That’s not related to the four expressions of Geulah—that’s what Hashem does. *Vi-yadattem* is up to us—that’s really the fifth lashon of Geulah. Why do we not drink the fifth kos, asks the Netziv? Because the reason why we drink the four kosos is for what Hashem did for us. Why do we call the fifth kos the Kos Shel Eliyahu? Because he is a paradigmatic example. He internalized this message so well that he went up to Shomayim without having to die first. Therefore, we pour the fifth kos on the table and don’t drink it yet, because the other four kosos are for things we celebrate. Yet the fifth kos is for something with which we challenge ourselves. We pour it on the table and say: Don’t drink it yet. Get to

the stage when you can drink that kos. It's sitting here for you. Do something about it! And I think this insight from Netziv is an unbelievably valuable addition to our Pesach Seder experience. I am not in a position to decide between Ra'avad and Netziv in this machlokes. But, ultimately, these four kosos—everything that Hashem did to us—lead us to the challenge of *vi-yadattem ki Ani Hashem*. What do we do next after we lein Parsha Va'eira and after we have the

Pesach Seder? It's waiting for us—for our heart—and not just for Eliyahu ha-Navi to be *mekayem ve-heshiv lev avos al banim v'lev banim al avosam*. It's waiting to see if we are going to be different people when we wake up tomorrow morning because of *ve-hotseisi, ve-hitsalti, ve-go'alti, ve-lakachti eschem Li le-am, ve-hayisi lachem l-Eylokim*—because we have a special mission in Hashem's world. Shabbat Shalom.

The Secret of Galus and Ge'ula

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The Midrash on Parshas Va'eira cites a pasuk: “I see that with wisdom comes foolishness, because who is man to question what the king has already decreed and done?” (Koheles 2:12)

The Midrash says this refers to the question of Moshe recorded at the end of Parshas Shemos. Hashem told Moshe that Pharaoh would not let the people go. Hashem added that He would strengthen Pharaoh's heart. Moshe knew his mission would be difficult and that he would not succeed right away. Nonetheless, he was upset after his initial meeting with Pharaoh had worsened the Jews' situation as slaves in Egypt—Pharaoh had made a new decree that the Jews would have to gather their own straw to make bricks.

Upset, Moshe complained to Hashem and posed a challenging question: “Why did You send me?”

The Shem Mishmuel notes that the Midrash itself is puzzling. It seems that Hashem was criticizing Moshe for responding inappropriately. But why? After all, when Hashem told Moshe to go to Pharaoh, He had told him only that Pharaoh would not listen. He did not tell Moshe that things would get worse. Now, Bnei Yisrael had no time to rest from the horrible forced labor. Moshe felt guilty that he had caused this. This aspect of Pharaoh's response was not predicted. Why, then, is Moshe criticized for questioning the meaning of his mission?

Additionally, what is God's answer to Moshe. “*Ata sireh asher e'eseh l'Pharaoh*. Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh?” How does that account for Moshe's complaint?

The Deep Challenge of Continuity

To explain this passage, the Shem Mishmuel focuses on a Midrash in Parshas Vayeishev. The Torah says Yaakov sent Yosef “from the valley of Chevron (*emek Chevron*)” to find his brothers. The city of Chevron, however, is on a hill,

not in a valley. Why does the Torah say that Yaakov sent Yosef from a valley? Our sage interpret the word “*emek*” as to imply “*eitza amuka*”—the deepest idea of the tzaddik Avraham, who is buried in Chevron.

This mission of Yosef would lead him to the place where the brothers would sell him, eventually to become a slave in Egypt. This sale initiated a series of events in which the whole family of Yaakov came to settle in Mitzrayim, where they subsequently became enslaved.

The Midrash explains the geographically inaccurate statement of the Torah. Yaakov sent Yosef based on the deep idea (*eitza amuka*) of the tzaddik Avraham Avinu, who is buried in Chevron. Hashem had made a covenant with Avraham many years earlier—the *bris bein habesarim*—wherein Hashem foretold the exile, slavery, and suffering of the Jewish People. This was a deep idea that Avraham Avinu had suggested to Hashem, as we will explain.

The question that Avraham and Hashem were considering was that of continuity. This is the fundamental problem of the Jewish People. How do we continue from one generation to the next? Avraham was a great man, as were Yitzchak and Yaakov. But how could they perpetuate this greatness from generation to generation? While individual great people do exist, masses of millions of people are not necessarily great. How do you pass on the greatness of an Avraham or Yitzchak to the whole nation in future generations?

Hashem was going to give Bnei Yisrael tremendous blessings: Eretz Yisrael, Torah, and olam haba. They are great and unique gifts that the Jewish People is privileged to have received from Hashem. Think about Eretz Yisrael. So many nations continuously want to take that land. No nation has ever successfully done so. It always remains

the exclusive gift of the Jewish People. In our days, after a period of 1900 years, the land has come back to its people. No other nation ever has been exiled from a land and returned: not the Nordic tribes of Netherlands and Germany, nor the old tribes that used to live in the English Isles, nor anyone else. The Jewish People, though, returned to the Holy Land where Hashem's eyes watch from the beginning of the year until the end of the year (Devarim 11:12).

Then we have the gift of Torah, the ultimate gift to the human race. We can know God's plans for running the world and what He expects of human beings. It takes us from the lowest levels of this world to the highest level of heaven. The gift of *olam haba* is when the world will change completely and there will be only good, not evil.

But these gifts must be deserved. Otherwise, the whole world would have them; and these three gifts are unique to the Jewish People. They come with serious requirements and prerequisites. *Yisurim*, suffering, is part of the price to earn these gifts.

How can the avos guarantee that their children will live up to their level? Avraham was having a serious discussion about this. Hashem asked him, "What do you prefer? You can pick *gehinom*, hell, with severe and terrible punishments, so your offspring will be afraid to stray from the tradition. Or you can choose *galus*, exile, a sort of suffering in this world instead of suffering in the next world." Avraham chose *galus*, the sufferings and travails in this world of exile from the Holy Land, to be the guarantor of the righteousness of the Jews instead of the suffering of hell in the next world.

Why did Avraham choose *galus*—subjugation and slavery to other nations—as the basic way to guarantee our continuity as a nation? Why didn't he choose *gehinom*? This is the *aitza amuka*. *Galus* and *ge'ula*, exile and redemption, are the fundamental cycle of our history.

The Depths of Exile

Avraham realized a deep idea. If the Jewish People would have the guarantee of the suffering of hell, they would inevitably stray from the Torah throughout the generations. Sometimes, life is too easy, and people take the blessings of Hashem for granted. Sometimes, people feel the desire to taste foreign waters. It is almost inevitable that a generation will drift away from the Torah. If they are brought back because of the punishments of *gehinom*, then their failings remain and are not redeemed. If, on the other

hand, the people receive the physical punishment of exile in this world, and we are distant from our land, our God, and His blessings, we can be moved to return. Sometimes there are pogroms, poverty, and hunger. The silver lining in the *galus* is that it must result in a *ge'ula*, redemption in this world. When the *ge'ula* comes, it is a redemption of the *galus* itself. As bad as *galus* is, that is how sweet the redemption will be.

We have suffered physically. Moreover, we have been the target of an ideological and philosophical campaign against our religion. Our enemies in this world have made our faith their target. The two religions that came out of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, turned Judaism into a target of their hatred and calumny. They claimed that Hashem abandoned His people and replaced us with another. This is a horrible *chilul Hashem*. When we come back now to Israel at the end of this exile of Edom and Yishmael, we are actually seeing the first rays of *ge'ula* with the return of millions of Jews to the Holy Land. This *ge'ula* will prove that the Jews were right despite all the troubles suffered throughout the *galus*. The *kiddush Hashem* of the final *ge'ula* will be directly proportionate to the pain of the *galus*.

The Pain of the Exile Teaches the Lessons of the Redemption

The *Shem Mishmuel* explains that the *galus*-and-*ge'ula* method of Jewish life throughout history is better than hell. Hell has terrible punishments, much worse than what we suffer in this world. But the redemption at the end of the *galus* is a redemption of the *galus* itself. Let's examine the *galus* of Egypt. The worse the exile was, the greater the redemption when it arrived. Indeed, the redemption from Egypt was the defining event of the emergence of the Jewish religion. It established the principal truth of God's intervention in human history, *hashgacha pratit*. God will interfere in human events. He is concerned with good and evil. He wants evil to be punished and good to be redeemed. This lesson was established via the *ge'ula* of *Mitzrayim*. The worse the *galus*, the greater the redemption and the more significant in terms of our philosophy and beliefs.

The final redemption will be a much greater establishment of God's holiness in the world. After 1900 years of exile, the redemption will be a much greater revelation than ever before. The people will learn about the Torah and about Hashem's interference and involvement in this world. Hashem will eradicate evil and replace it

with goodness in every single person's heart, not just in the Jewish People. As we say on Rosh Hashana, "v'yeida kol pa'ul ki ata f'alto v'yavin kol y'tzur ki atah y'tzarto." Every human being will know that Hashem is the creator and shaper of every person, not just the Jewish People. Since the galus was so long and bitter, the ge'ula in parallel will be a great, universal event.

This was the idea of Avraham—to take the exile for Israel, the bitterness and suffering of Jews throughout the world. This will be a redemption of the very sins that led to the exile. They will become a part of the redemption.

Sins That Drive a Person to Holiness

The Chassidic masters presented a fascinating analysis of teshuva. The Gemara (Yoma 86b) says that if a sinner does teshuva out of love, his sins become mitzvos. What does this mean? People can have different motivations for teshuva. A person can repent due to fear of being punished. Or he may repent because he realizes the terrible immoral nature of his sins. He then realizes that the more he sins, the more he must return. The desecration of his character that his sins cause is the impetus for his repentance. In a strange way, his sins drive him towards good. Before sinning, his Judaism was probably boring. He did not feel commitment, and hence he sinned. But those sins caused him to reconsider and redirect his life. The sins caused him to care and to do teshuva. Chazal say that ba'alei teshuva are greater in some ways than tzaddikim. The ba'al teshuva has a passion that some good people lack, one which his sins helped to create within him.

This does not mean that a person should sin and then do teshuva. But if a person did sin and follows it with teshuva, then his sins become mitzvos. A sinner is not condemned. He can repent, which will give him power and energy to serve Hashem. This is something I have seen year after year. The people who come back after sinning have an amazing fire and appreciation for Torah and mitzvos. People who come from plainer backgrounds often seem bored with their mechanical Jewish lifestyle. They exhibit a blasé attitude towards Judaism. I don't recommend sin; it is, after all, prohibited. We need to come up with other strategies to inspire people. But if someone made the mistake of sinning, he should realize that the sin made great trouble for himself. He can then use that realization to propel himself to heights of avodas Hashem. The sin then becomes a mitzva.

Galus Inevitably Leads and Contributes To a Ge'ula

Galus and ge'ula on a national level have a tremendous impact on us. The nature and essence of galus is chilul Hashem. We are the people of Hashem. If we are suffering in exile, then God is suffering in exile, too. His holy name, which is associated with us, is a target. People can say that God has abandoned us and chosen another people. Nonetheless, God made His choice of His people forever, and He does not change. But the saving grace of the exile is that it must conclude with a ge'ula. This was Avraham's suggestion that Hashem accepted. They committed themselves to a pact based on this idea at the bris bein habesarim. Hashem said to Avraham, "Your nation will be servants and slaves for 400 years, but afterwards I will take them out with great wealth." This promise of redemption holds true for every galus we are in, including the current long exile.

Yosef and his brothers fought with each other and caused the exile in Egypt to begin. When the people finally left Egypt, however, they received the great treasure of the Torah. In Egypt they learned the enthusiasm for the Torah, and when Hashem offered them the Torah at Har Sinai, they excitedly exclaimed, "na'aseh v'nishma." The people learned to appreciate the lessons of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov. They learned the lesson of the galus. They were comparable to an individual who does a sin but then does teshuva.

Galus is indeed a terrible desecration of Hashem's name. But ge'ula is a reaffirmation of His relationship with the Jewish People. This brings about a sanctification of God's name, powered by the very questions the chilul Hashem of galus aroused.

Every galus leads towards a ge'ula. Being slaves in Egypt brought us to the Torah at Har Sinai. The knowledge of this secret makes it easier for us living in galus. The Shem Mishmuel lived around 1910, before the State of Israel, during the bitter years of European exile. He said that the suffering of his galus would lead to a greater redemption. The sanctification would be so much greater based on the problems of the difficult galus. This idea should give us hope while enduring our own troubles today.

The Weekly Galus and Ge'ula

The six days of the week are a galus of the soul from spirituality. During the six days of the week, we feel profane, alienated, and frustrated. We would want every second of the week to be spiritual, like olam haba. We crave sweet and pleasant Godliness. After the sin of Adam

and Chava, though, Hashem saw that this was not the right prescription for humanity. People must be alienated and separated from spirituality for six days so that they will appreciate the sweetness of the spirit. The week is a spiritual galus for the soul. We face many difficulties that make us feel distant from Hashem and even, perhaps, from ourselves. This distance, though, helps us value and achieve on Shabbos the closeness that we missed during the week.

The Gemara (Avoda Zara 3a) teaches that whoever works on Erev Shabbos will eat on Shabbos. Whoever struggles to prepare food on Friday will eat and enjoy the meals of Shabbos. From a drush perspective, someone who struggles with the alienation and spiritual distance he experiences during the week will experience the connection and strengthening of Shabbos. He will enjoy Shabbos. He will even retroactively enjoy those six weekdays without the Shabbos. The galus itself will turn into a mitzva, into something good, because it makes a kiddush Hashem at the end.

The pasuk states, “*Mikolos mayim rabim adirim ... adir bamarom Hashem*. From the voice of the raging powerful waters and waves in the ocean is God powerful in heaven” (Tehillim 93:4). The Gemara (Menachos 53a) explains that the raging waters refer to the many nations who array themselves against the Jewish People. Egypt was the worst and most powerful of those nations. From these exiles, from these powerful waters, comes Hashem, the Ultimate Power. In the end, the galus produces a great sanctification of God’s name.

Hashem Wanted Pharaoh to Just Say No

This explains why God willed that Pharaoh not succumb during the last five plagues. Hashem gave Pharaoh unnatural strength so that he would be punished five more times. And even if he had wanted to change, Hashem would not have let him do so. Removing someone’s ability to change is an unusual punishment. The Shem Mishmuel explains that before Moshe went to speak to Pharaoh, Moshe protested, “I stutter. I am the wrong person to talk to Pharaoh.” Hashem said, “Don’t worry. I will be in your mouth.”

Some of the Sages have said that when Moshe opened his mouth, Hashem Himself spoke (Shemos Rabba 3). You can imagine that when someone would hear God’s voice, he would feel compelled to comply. Even evil Pharaoh would have responded, “Yes, I will listen to my Master and Creator.” But Pharaoh defied Hashem, saying instead, “I

will not let them go.” This was a crazy perversion. Human beings can make themselves absolutely evil. We have seen Hitler and Stalin. Today, we see the religious jihadist murderers who want to destroy the Jewish People. Their hatred is fanatical and their wickedness is astounding. Pharaoh, Amalek, Hitler, and other scoundrels pervert even God’s voice. They convert it into the power to do evil.

Thus, Pharaoh made things even worse after hearing God’s voice emanating from Moshe’s mouth. He decreed that the Jews must gather their own straw. So Hashem said, “If you pervert even My voice to add power to evil, I will take away your power of teshuva. I will take away a fundamental human gift—the power to change.” Before God created man, He created teshuva to be available to give man the ability to change. But Pharaoh wouldn’t listen even to God Himself. So, Hashem took away his chance to repent and change.

Moshe needed to go to Pharaoh and bring the voice of Hashem to his ears. The Shem Mishmuel contends that God would have given Pharaoh 100 plagues, but the Jews were at the breaking point, so He took them out sooner.

How many plagues does a Hitler or Stalin deserve? Ten wasn’t enough for Pharaoh. He deserved to lose the power of teshuva so that he could receive a few more plagues.

Why Did You Make Things Worse?!

Moshe challenged Hashem, “Why did You make things worse?” Hashem responded by explaining the promise He made to Avraham. There are many lessons to teach the world. The world needs to know that God is Creator of heaven and earth, that He controls water, earth, animals, and the skies. These lessons were taught via the plagues. People needed to learn of God’s control over life and death, and even (in Pharaoh’s case) over the human spirit. God is concerned with good and evil and ultimately will cause good to triumph. The sanctification of Hashem’s name will thus be that much greater. The darker the galus, the greater the ge’ula. This was why it had to become worse before it got better.

This was Hashem’s answer to Moshe. Today, we still need to get to the ultimate level of kiddush Hashem in order to justify the suffering of the Jewish People over the 1900 long years of our exile. This is why the Midrash criticizes Moshe. Moshe should have recognized this on his own. If God said, “I will strengthen Pharaoh’s heart,” then Pharaoh’s heart would be strengthened, and Pharaoh would make things even worse. Nothing Moshe could

say would convince Pharaoh to let the Jewish People go. Moshe, at his great level, should have understood this instead of asking questions.

A profound lesson is hidden in this idea of the Shem Mishmuel. As we go through the difficulties of life, the six days of the week, and the sufferings of the exile, we must have hope and feel encouragement that the ge'ula will be

Fact Checking

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Moshe was hand selected to liberate us from Egypt and to introduce Hashem to a human audience which had previously ignored Him. Moshe possessed an impressive blend of personal qualities, each of which would serve him in his long and storied career.

As a young baby he was graced with radiant good looks, which drew the interest of an Egyptian princess. Raised by royals, his palace upbringing endowed him with the confidence to challenge Pharaoh and his intimidating court of magicians. Moshe deeply sensed the pain of human suffering, endangering his own life to rescue a battered Jewish slave. He valiantly defended the weak against injustice, saving unknown shepherd girls from local tormenters. Recognizing the futility of petty squabbling, he challenged two quarrelling Jews to rise above their small-mindedness and spite and behave more gracefully. Loyal to his past, he delayed his grand mission, first securing permission from his father-in-law and only afterwards, relocating the family to Egypt. Moshe's resume is brimming with leadership qualities.

Additionally, Moshe was the consummate outsider: a Jewish baby, raised by an Egyptian princess, married to a Midyanite woman, his broad exposure and diverse experiences provided him with fresh perspective, and allowed his unbiased eyes to see the world large and whole. This future leader combined an impressive array of character traits with a wide range of experiences, and he appeared to be the perfect candidate for historical mission.

Impaired Speech

There was only one problem: this multi-talented man possessed a severe speech impediment. Acknowledging his own handicap, Moshe was initially hesitant to accept this complicated mission. How could he stand before Pharaoh,

even greater than the exile. As we have faith in the coming redemption, we should take strength and encouragement during the exile. As we go through the sufferings of the covenant between Hashem and Avraham, the *aitza amukah* of the tzaddik buried in Chevron, we know the great future that is developing. This is the plan for Jewish history until the advent of the redemption, which we eagerly await.

representing Hashem, when he could not speak clearly and emphatically? How could an inelegant tongue issue divine demands to monarchs, and utter divine commands to Jews.

Yet, for some reason, this impediment did not disqualify Moshe from his mission. Evidently, his unusual mix of noble character traits was so rare that, despite his impairment, he was still the best candidate for these great tasks. He may not have been perfect, but he was still the best option.

What is odd, is that he wasn't miraculously healed of his condition by Hashem. After all, Hashem pulled out "all stops" and performed epic and dramatic miracles to emancipate us from Egypt. Wouldn't it have made sense for Hashem to repair Moshe's tongue, empowering him to speak more capably? This minor miracle of improving Moshe's speaking abilities would have gone a long way toward advancing his ambitious agenda, yet Hashem preserved Moshe's speech impediment, dispatching him to his duties without impressive rhetorical skills. Evidently, Moshe's speech limitations did not impair his mission but, if anything, enhanced it. Had Moshe been a better orator, perhaps he would have been a worse leader. His impairment was an asset.

Cultism

Moshe freed us from Egypt and defeated the greatest superpower on earth, eventually navigating our people to the doorstep of history and the entrance to Israel. Along this journey he performed dazzling miracles and astounding supernatural feats. His rising popularity and expanding influence invited the unhealthy possibility of that a cult of personality would develop. Having been enslaved for two centuries, the former slaves were especially vulnerable to the influence of charisma and the peddling of personality. The impressionable young nation

could very easily have been captivated by charisma and charm rather than being educated by values. The human imagination is always tempted by charisma, and Moshe's spectacular feats, coupled with the gullibility of a young nation, created a perfect storm for the emergence of a personality cult.

Retaining Moshe's imperfect speech averted this danger. Our speech conveys ideas, but it also projects our personality and our charisma. Speech without character and without passion is hollow and boring. Potent speech imbued with powerful spirit, grips a listener and penetrates the soul.

However, at some point, passionate rhetoric conveys too much of own personality and enchanting the listener with the speaker rather than with some larger idea or content. Checking against this danger, Moshe's flawed speech assured that his charisma would never overtake his content. No one would ever be impressed with Moshe's eloquence or with his underdeveloped rhetoric, but instead, would be attracted to his nobility of character, his quiet humility, and his uncommon compassion. He would model moral traits such as courage, faith, dedication to nation, tolerance, and of course, dedicated Torah scholarship. Though he may never deliver booming speeches he will provide powerful but hushed moral lessons. There will be no cult of personality surrounding a speech-challenged leader. There will be, however, deep values, profound role modeling and enduring education.

Absolute Fact

Additionally, Moshe's muted speech assures that a different voice will reverberate- the heavenly one. Moshe delivered the direct word of Hashem by brokering mass revelation at Sinai. That seminal moment at Sinai, when we heard the direct voice of Hashem forms the cornerstone of Jewish faith. For faith to endure, the accuracy of that mountain conversation must be unmistakable. The Jews at Sinai must be absolutely certain that they were listening directly to Hashem and not to a prophetic translation. Without that absolute certainty, Jewish faith would never survive. If Moshe were a more seasoned orator, the directness of our encounter with Hashem could have been questioned. Perhaps the commandments were a product of Moshe's imagination, or just flowery rhetoric, rather than a direct missive from Hashem. By positioning a heavy tongued speaker on top of the mountain, it was clear to all that all the content at Sinai was Hashem given.

Sinai was based on absolute facts of direct revelation rather than on speculation, prophecy or human projection. Ironically, Moshe's speech limitations made it easier to separate these facts from his personality.

The Swirl of Opinions

In the 21st century we face our own struggle to separate fact from personality. It has become more and more difficult to obtain accurate information untainted by personal opinions. Social media has altered the flow of information, by providing a universal and easily accessible platform for strongly held opinions. Social media provides an endless buffet of personal opinion, but there isn't much fact on the menu.

Furthermore, by carefully curating and selecting our sources of information, we trap ourselves in echo chambers, listening only to the views of those we agree with, and rarely encountering different views.

News outlets are no longer information providers but loud and fanatical megaphones, patriotically broadcasting political agendas. In this storm of swirling opinions, it is impossible to discern honest facts from personal observations. In the past, humanity had little need for "fact checkers" as accuracy was implicit in conversation. Our dependence upon factcheckers, who are assigned to monitor accuracy, is a sad reflection of the sunken state of human communication in the modern world of polarized politics and sharply divided outlooks.

Tragically, we become our own greatest victims. Honesty and deception are each contagious. The more honest our outside world is, the more honest our internal world becomes, and the more accurate we can be in self-assessment, self-awareness and personal growth. A world in which opinions masquerade as fact, erodes our ability to honestly assess our own experiences and behavior. Intellectual honesty and personal honesty have become rare commodities in a world which distorts fact and fiction.

It is important to restore the balance between fact and opinion. It is vital to write and speak in a balanced fashion and to present fact as apart from opinion. We should value those who offer their opinion but also admit that other opinions can be drawn from identical facts. We should listen to those who "suggest" rather than those who attempt to convince or indoctrinate. We should value inner wisdom not cheap opinion. We need more quiet people like Moshe and fewer shrill bullhorns.

The Apocalypse at the Heart of the Exodus

Rabbi Adam Friedmann

Our parshah begins with G-d appar-ently reiterating the impetus and plan for taking the Jews out of Egypt. G-d tells Moshe that His name is Hashem, and that this name was not known to the patriarchs. G-d intends to fulfill His covenant with the patriarchs. He therefore tells Moshe to go and tell the Jews that He will take the following steps:

- Free them from the slavery of Egypt;
- Take the Jews to Him as a people so that they know that He is the one who took them out of Egypt;
- Bring them to the land that He swore to give to their forefathers.

Moshe tries to communicate this message, but the nation refuses to listen to him because of “shortness of spirit” and the difficulty of their work.

G-d then tells Moshe to tell Pharaoh to send the Jews out of Egypt. Moshe responds that if the Jews wouldn't listen to his message, all the more so Pharaoh would not. He argues that as a person with a speech impediment, he is ill-equipped for this task.

G-d's response to this argument is to place Moshe and Aharon in command over both Pharaoh and Bnei Yisrael (see Rashi to Shemot 6:13). G-d makes Moshe a lord over Pharaoh and Aharon becomes his prophet. It's here that we first hear about the plan to harden Pharaoh's heart in response to G-d's miracles. The end result: *“The Egyptians will know that I am Hashem, when I stretch out My hand over Egypt and bring Bnei Yisrael out from among them”* (Shemot 7:3)

There are two big structural questions to ask about this narrative.

1) Firstly, didn't G-d already tell Moshe about His plan in last week's parshah? Why is it repeated? Is there something new in this version?

2) Secondly, how does G-d's response of placing Moshe in command over Bnei Yisrael and Pharaoh solve the issue

that no one was able or willing to lis-ten? What does this position of 'command' change?

Rashi (Shemot 6:3, 9) answers the first question. In last week's parshah, G-d only spoke about freeing the Jews from slavery and returning them to their land. This week's parshah emphasizes a new element, the revelation of G-d as Hashem, the Creator. As we saw in the synopsis above, by the time the dust settles on the Exodus story, both the Jews and the Egyptians will have gained an acute awareness of Hashem. This plan for mass spiritual enlightenment is a major addition to what we read about last week. It is this broader spiritual vision that the Jews were unable to fathom in their current circumstances (see Ramban to Shemot 6:9), and Pharaoh rejected outright.

The answer to the second question lies in the nature of Moshe's prophetic mis-sion. There are different kinds of prophecy. Sometimes the mission of a prophet is to convince others about the truth of their prophetic vision using rhetoric.

This is what Moshe thought he was be-ing sent to do. His task was to inspire the Jews to hope for freedom and con-vince Pharaoh to let the Jews go. In this kind of role, a speech impediment is a major obstacle. But by placing Moshe in 'command' of the Jews and Pharaoh, G-d tells Moshe that he has a different prophetic task. Instead of inspiring and persuading, Moshe is to dictate. He is the mouthpiece in G-d's plan to overwhelm the bodies, hearts, and minds of both the Jews and Egyptians. Apparent-ly, the revelation of G-d as Hashem couldn't be accomplished through prophetically inspired rhetoric. It required apocalyptic force.

This understanding of the shifts in both G-d's revealed plans and Moshe's role provides a framework for reading the rest of the story of the Exodus and for the deeper spiritual messages it teaches us.

Rebuke With Love

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Va'era, the great Exodus from Egypt begins; the redemption which takes the Israelites from a downtrodden and oppressed nation, to a people of freedom and liberty. The first seven makkos

unfold and with each plague, Moshe and Aharon warn Pharaoh that if he does not let the nation go, G-d will wreak havoc upon him, but with a hardened heart, Pharaoh continues to say 'no.'

At the very beginning of the sedra, after Hashem promises Moshe the “*arbah leshonos geula*” (the Four Promises of Redemption for which we drink four cups of wine at the Pesach Seder), and the fifth of “*וְהַבְּאֵתִי*” (the promise of Eretz Yisrael) the pasukim tell us: “And Hashem spoke to Moshe saying: Come speak to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, that he shall send the Children of Israel from his land” (Shemos 6:10-11). And yet, strangely, two pasukim later, in a seemingly redundant fashion, the pasuk says: *וַיְדַבֵּר ה' אֶל-מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל-אַהֲרֹן, וַיְצַוֵם אֶל-בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל, וְאֶל-פְּרַעֲהַ מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם - אֲלֵהוּצִיא אֶת-בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל, מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם* - *And Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them to the Children of Israel and to Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt (6:13).*

What does the second verse teach us that the first verse does not? As we know every word in the Torah is measured, it cannot simply be repeating the same information for naught. Rashi, quoting Medrash Rabbah, explains: *ואל פרעה מלך מצרים. צוּם עָלָיו לְחַלֵּק לוֹ כְבוֹד בְּדַבְרֵיהֶם. וְהָאֵל פְּרַעֲהַ מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם - Hashem commanded them concerning Pharaoh, to accord honor to him with their words* (Rashi to Shemos 6:13). Hence, the first verse is instructing Moshe and Aharon to go to Pharaoh. And the second is instructing Moshe and Aharon that when they go to Pharaoh, they should speak to him with honor and respect.

Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski z'l writes, “Is this not a bit strange? Moshe was going to warn Pharaoh about the ten plagues that he would suffer. In the presence of all the ministers in the palace, Moshe was going to speak harshly to Pharaoh, and warn him about impending doom. How could this be respectful? R' Yehudah Leib Chasman zt'l (1869-1934) says that there was no way out of delivering the warning to Pharaoh. However, although what had to be said had to be said it could still be said respectfully rather than with indignation. Indeed, we see that when Moshe told Pharaoh about the plague of the firstborn, at which time Moshe was angry, he nevertheless spoke with respect for the king (Shemos 11:8 w/ Rashi: *וירדו כל עבדיך. (חלק כבוד למלכות).*)

“The Torah is teaching us that even when we must reprimand or punish someone, we should make every effort to avoid insulting him. This is so important in disciplining children. Certainly, children must be reprimanded when they do wrong, and sometimes it is necessary to punish them. However, we should be most cautious to do so in a manner that does not humiliate the

child or crush his spirits. Children who were insulted when they were disciplined are likely to develop feelings of shame and worthlessness which may accompany them throughout their lives. If parents would realize how destructive low self-esteem is to their children, they would be much more careful in how they discipline them. Emotional abuse of a child is as serious an offense as physical abuse. Yet, parents who would never think of breaking a child's bones may not give much thought to the words they use in a reprimand. Children must surely be taught right from wrong, but the teachings must be done in a way that retains the dignity of the child” (Twerski on Chumash, p.120).

This is such an important lesson for all of our interactions with others. There are times when errors must be noted, pointed out, and at times, rebuked. But the rebuke must always be given with respect for the other party, and while the behavior is rebuked, the person's integrity must never be.

We learn this from Yaakov Avinu in his bracha to Shimon and Levi. With the words: *כִּי בְאַפִם הָרְגוּ אִישׁ*, he rebuked their actions against Chamor and the people of Shechem (Bereishis 49:6 w/ Rashi), nevertheless, Yaakov said: *אָרוּר אַפִּם כִּי עָז וְעִבְרָתָם כִּי קִשְׁתָּהּ*, *Cursed be their wrath for it is mighty, and their anger because it is harsh.* Rashi teaches: *אֶפְלוּ בְשַׁעַת תּוֹכְחָה לֹא קָלָל אֶלְא אַפִּם* - *even at the time of rebuke, Yaakov only cursed their anger.*

As the Sages teach: *לְעוֹלָם תִּהְיֶה שְׂמַאל דּוֹחָה וְיָמִין מְקַרְבֶּת*: *a person must always 'push one away' (give rebuke) with the left hand (give rebuke weakly), and draw close with the right hand (be effusive and generous with compliments and praise)* (Sotah 47a).

It happened one time that on the 8th day of Pesach, Rav Moshe's doorbell rang (HaGaon Rav Moshe Feinstein zt'l (1895-1986)). A talmid present opened the door and admitted an elderly European woman. Rav Moshe made a point of averting his gaze so it was obvious that he could not see the woman's face. The woman said her sister had passed away on yomtov and she had a question to ask regarding using the deceased's possessions. Rav Moshe answered her question and then with his gaze still averted, he said in a soft voice, “Today is yomtov, why did you ring the bell?”

The woman replied, “I come from Poland and we eat gebroktz on the last day of Pesach.” She mistakenly thought that the dispensation of this custom on the 8th

day of Pesach meant it had the status of Chol HaMoed or less. Rav Moshe explained to her that this was incorrect, and then he wished her well and she left. Rav Moshe then turned to his talmid and said, “I kept my eyes averted because I had to point out her error in ringing the doorbell. This way, she will not be embarrassed should we meet

again, because she knows I do not know who she is” (Reb Moshe, Artscroll, 25th yartzheit edition, p.367-368).

ממשה ועד משה, לא קם כמשה. Even when it was necessary for Moshe to rebuke Pharaoh, the Torah teaches us a powerful lesson in human interactions. When rebuke must be given, it must be done with respect, concern and love.

The Exodus—A ‘Primitive’ Story with Revolutionary Implications

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

Jewish history is often perceived, with great justification I might add, as one unending series of tragedies, pogroms, expulsions, inquisitions, crusades, destructions, exiles, and ultimately, Holocausts. As we read in the Passover Haggadah: שְׁבַקְלָהּ דוֹר וָדוֹר עוֹמְדִים: עָלֵינוּ לְכַלּוֹתֵנוּ In every generation they (our enemies) rise up to destroy us.

Even a cursory review of the Jewish calendar, will confirm this stark perspective. The counting of the Omer between Passover and Shavuot, recalls the 24,000 students of Rabbi Akiva who died during that 49-day period. Most of the Jewish fast days serve to mark the process of the destruction, or the actual destruction, of the two Temples. Purim, yes, the joyous festival of Purim, celebrates the fact that the Jews were at the very precipice of destruction by Haman, and were miraculously saved. And, of course, even Passover, with the awesome Ten Plagues and the miraculous splitting of the Reed Sea—how wondrous! But Jewish children were cast into the sea, and plastered into the walls by the Egyptians when the Hebrews failed to produce the sufficient number of bricks! On Passover we speak of גְּלוּת—Galut—exile, עֲבָדוּת—avdut—enslavement, and of עֲנוּי—inui—persecution.

And so it is, because of the constant stream of tragedies, that, at times, we Jews feel like just throwing up our hands in desperation and crying out: Who needs it? לֹא מִדְּבַשׁךְ וְלֹא מִמְּעֻקְצֶךָ! “Please, Al-mighty, enough of your honey, and enough of your sting!”

But this perception is incorrect!

Jewish history is really one unending series of moral, educational, and ethical triumphs and victories, but we fail to perceive it! We fail to recognize the untold revolutionary contributions that Judaism has made to humanity. To the contrary, too often we perceive Judaism as negative and overwhelming.

This week’s parasha, parashat Va’eira, continues the

narrative concerning the Children of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt, leading to the ultimate redemption from Egypt. At first glance, it appears to be a simple, almost primitive, story. Moses, the stammerer and the murmurer, becomes a great leader. The various plagues—blood, frogs, lice, boils are visited upon the Egyptians—how infantile! Pharaoh hardens his heart!

Yes, it’s a great story: It features suspense—Moses the babe is hidden in the bulrushes! There’s drama—he’s saved by Pharaoh’s own daughter. Heroism—Moses saves the Jew’s life by killing the Egyptian. There’s treachery—a Jew threatens to squeal on Moses, and Moses must flee from Egypt to Midian. There’s romance—Moses meets Tzipora at the well in Midian. Supernaturalism—the burning bush is not consumed. The hero is saved at the last moment—Tzipora circumcises Eliezar when G-d wants to kill Moses for not circumcising the child. There’s even comedy—Pharaoh, according to the commentaries, is caught in a compromising position with his pants down at the riverside, as Moses and Aaron confront him. Admittedly, there’s not much racy material that would qualify for a contemporary Hollywood script, except perhaps the Midrash’s account of the affair of Shlomit bat Divri and the Egyptian. But there’s plenty of violence, wild animals, and of course, the death of a firstborn. There’s underwater drama—the drowning in the Reed Sea—some of the Egyptians drown as stubble, some as stone, and some as lead. What a story! But will it play in Peoria? It seems to be rather puerile, brutal, and unduly cruel.

And so, we ask: What is the nature of our proud Jewish religion? What is the meaning of the story upon which much of our faith is based?

There is a story, that has been floating around the internet for many years, probably apocryphal, and hardly PC today, about two women from York, Pennsylvania, who came to the Big Apple for a shopping spree, and stayed at

the Plaza Hotel. This was before Giuliani became Mayor, and they were, of course, justly terrified that they would be victims of a crime during their stay in the city. So, they locked and chained their hotel door securely that night, and propped a chair up against the doorknob for added safety. They tossed-and-turned the entire night, consumed with dread fear of what lay in store for them the next day.

In the morning, when they were ready to go down for breakfast, they listened at the door to make certain that there was no one in the hallway. Fearfully, they gathered enough courage to tiptoe down the hallway and press the elevator button. The elevator door opened, and standing in the elevator, was a huge black man with a big white dog. The black man said, “Sit Whitey,” and the two ladies sat right down on the floor!

The reaction of these two women recalls the response of the ten scouts who brought back a negative report upon their return from their mission to Canaan. They said (Numbers 13:33): וְנָהִי בְעֵינֵינוּ כַּחֲגָבִים, וְכֹן הָיינוּ בְעֵינֵיהֶם: “We were in our own eyes as grasshoppers, as pigmies, and so the people of the land perceived us—as pigmies.”

We Jews are often so completely consumed by fear and trepidation, that we forget about the incredible positive and joyous parts of Jewish tradition and Jewish history.

This must change! We must communicate an upbeat message about our faith, especially to our young people, and to ourselves, as well. We have so much of which to be proud. There is a spectacular, revolutionary beauty in Yiddishkeit, but we fail to perceive it, and certainly fail to communicate it.

Is the story of Egypt that is recorded in the Bible, cruel insensitive, and unduly harsh? Can a faith system that teaches that Moses was not permitted to strike the water to inaugurate the plagues of blood and frogs upon Egypt because Moses the babe was saved by the water—can it be cruel? Neither could Moses heave the sand in order to effect the plague of lice, because he hid the Egyptian’s body in the sand, which saved Moses from retribution. Can a tradition that is so sensitive to “sand,” be justly perceived as being cruel, insensitive, and unduly harsh? After all, it is this same tradition which teaches that Jews who celebrate at the seder must remove a drop of wine each time we mention the name of one of the ten plagues, because Egyptians suffered in our liberation. It is this tradition, that teaches us that we may not say the full Hallel on Passover, because the Al-mighty says: מִיָּדֵי טוֹבָעִים בָּיָם וְאַתֶּם אוֹמְרִים

שִׁירָה, “that human beings, as guilty as the Egyptians were, the creations of G-d, are drowning in the sea, and you want to sing “Shira”—songs of praise, to Me?” Can such a tradition be cruel and uncaring? No, to the contrary, it’s revolutionary. It exudes wisdom, understanding and unparalleled mercy.

There’s no other faith tradition that teaches such boundless kindness, even at times of war, even when Jewish soldiers’ lives are at stake. וְקִרְאתָ אֶלֶיָּהּ לְשָׁלוֹם, (Deuteronomy 20:10)—Jewish law insists that we must greet the enemy with peace and allow them to flee, that we are not permitted to chop down fruit bearing trees, or divert waterworks, even in times of battle. These are the teachings that we must learn to appreciate and eagerly communicate. These are lessons that inspire!

The story of the Exodus from Egypt is by no means a simple or simplistic story. Even the structure of the ten plagues themselves reflect exile, servitude and persecution of the Egyptians in retribution for what the Egyptians did to the Hebrew slaves. Similarly, the origins and the character of Moses are unique and edifying.

The traditions of Passover teach us that we must accept the dominion of G-d upon us, and that Judaism provides a most effective structure for our People. Furthermore, from Passover we learn to celebrate חַג הָאָבִיב—“Chag Ha’aviv,” the festival of the springtime, showing ultimate respect for our environment—that we Jews must keenly “guard” the land, and “work” the land (Genesis 2:15). It teaches us that every seven years the land must rest (Leviticus 25), and be given a chance to regenerate. This is our tradition. It teaches us the incredible idea of Chag, the concept of a “joyous” holiday. It tells us that Moses says to Pharaoh, בְּנַעַרְיֵנוּ וּבְזַקְנֵינוּ נֵלֶךְ, (Exodus 10:9), “We must go forth with our young and with our old,” בְּבָנֵינוּ וּבְבָנוֹתֵנוּ, “We must go with our sons and with our daughters,” כִּי חַג הַשֵּׁם לָנוּ, “because this is a festival for us all!” It underscores the importance of celebrating together as a family. This is our faith!

We have so much of which to be proud, and we must let the world know. But the only way we will be in a position to let the world know is if we study and thoroughly familiarize ourselves with the story and the meanings behind the Exodus saga. It’s revolutionary!

Now, let us go forth and share it with the world!

An Attitude of Gratitude

Rabbi Efrem Goldberg

Rashi (7:19) famously observes that the first two plagues – blood and frogs – were brought about not by Moshe, but rather by Aharon. It was he who struck the river to change the water into blood, and then later struck the river to produce the frogs. The reason, Rashi explains, is because the river had protected Moshe when he was an infant and his mother hid him from the Egyptian authorities who sought to kill him in fulfillment of Pharaoh's decree. It was therefore inappropriate for Moshe to bring a plague upon the river. Similarly, as Rashi writes later (8:12), it was Aharon who struck the ground of Egypt to initiate the plague of vermin, because Moshe had used the earth of the ground to bury the body of the Egyptian whom he had killed for beating a slave.

Numerous ba'alei mussar have noted the crucial perspective on the quality of gratitude that this teaches us. Quite obviously, neither the river nor the ground – nor any other inanimate object – gains anything from people's expression of gratitude. If it was deemed inappropriate for Moshe to strike the river or the ground, then we must conclude that gratitude is vitally necessary not only for the feelings of the benefactor, but also for the beneficiary. We express appreciation for those who have helped us or served us not only for their benefit, so that they will feel good about what they did – which, in itself, is certainly

important – but primarily for ourselves, so we develop what we might call an “attitude of gratitude.” We must become grateful people, and we are therefore required to acknowledge and express appreciation for that which others have done for us, in order to cultivate this mindset.

Why is this “attitude of gratitude” so crucial? Why is it important for us to develop this sense of appreciation?

Rav Yitzchak Hutner explained by noting that the word for “thanksgiving” – הודאה – also means “admission.” When we express gratitude, we are making a confession, of sorts. We confess that we needed somebody else, that we depended on the grace, goodwill and assistance of another person. This is part of what makes expressing gratitude so difficult – it is an admission of dependence, of a lack of self-sufficiency. It is indeed humbling, and at times even embarrassing, to express genuine gratitude. But this admission is so vital for us, because this is what makes us humble. In order to properly serve God, we need to acknowledge and recognize our limitations, our reliance on His grace. And it is the central importance of humility as one of the foundations of the religious experience that requires us to sense and express gratitude. We are to show appreciation in order to become humbler and more attuned to our dependence on other people and on the Almighty.