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“KULTURKAMPF” - The Religious Situation in Israel Today

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 29, 1972)

Last year, when I last spoke of the religious situation in Israel, I expressed the hope that Israel would not be afflicted with a Kulturkampf. Today, after my most recent visit to the State of Israel, I must express the hope that we can emerge from it intact. Because we are well into it.

The term “Kulturkampf” is about a hundred years old. It goes back to Bismarck’s Germany, when a split occurred between the “Old Catholics” and the Church concerning the new doctrine of Papal infallibility. The battle, which raged mostly about education, posed a threat to the integrity of the civic and social fabric of Germany. And the Kulturkampf, or cultural collision, between religious Jews and secularist Jews in Israel today, this clash of commitments especially about education, is a fact of Israeli life with world-wide repercussions and dangers.

To hear the story from the combatants, one would have to believe that all religious Jews are Neanderthal bigots arrayed against the enlightened and open-minded secularists; or, alternatively, that the religious community is the army of the Lord, the only remaining loyalists to the Jewish tradition, who confront self-hating, anti-Semitic Israelis.

I wish I could tell you that either interpretation, in all its simplicity, is credible. I wish I could tell you that our side is always right, and the other always wrong. I wish I could tell you that we American Orthodox Jews can keep out of the battle or above the fray.

But none of these is true. And we shall have to enter the battle, like it or not, and we shall have to take each issue as it comes, examining it with discernment and discrimination, weighing and measuring, and not allowing our critical functions to be suspended because of the directives of any group of people. We shall have to participate in this cultural confrontation, and yet try to calm passions wherever possible. But, above all, we must

try to be honest. Because honesty, truth, and clarity are the chief casualties in the Kulturkampf so far.

What are some of the major issues? Last week, we spoke of the Russian Jews, especially the Georgian Jews. This week let us analyze briefly – I admit: too briefly to do them justice – some of the other issues. I shall begin with those in which the religious side is weakest.

The first issue is amusing, especially because it has nothing to do with the secularists or the non-religious, but is directed by the extreme right wing against the more “moderate” religious Jews. I refer to the banning of the recent World Conference of Orthodox Synagogues in Jerusalem in which I participated. At first the ban was placed on the meeting because it was decided to hold some sessions in the Haichal Shlomo, the seat of the Chief Rabbinate of Israel and a building identified with the Mizrahi. Later, it was expanded, so that the meeting was proscribed whether or not it took place in Haichal Shlomo. A wise and gentle and honorable sage was manipulated into issuing edicts of prohibition on matters that are far beneath his weighty concerns. One would imagine that the greatest problem in the Jewish world was the serious suspicion that a conspiracy was afoot between the President of the Orthodox Union, and the key-note speaker – namely, me – in conjunction with Major Jaffe, the Executive Director of Haichal Shlomo, and probably Rabbi Goren, the Chief Rabbi of Tel Aviv – stealthily to organize a Sanhedrin and present it full-blown for all the world as a *fait accompli*...

At times the problems are paranoiacally self-defeating. Such a case is the prohibition and the ban placed on the Midrasha, an institution dedicated to training rabbis for the State of Israel. On the eve of Rosh Hodesh Shevat a couple of week ago, a half-day fast was proclaimed in the pious sections of Meah Shearim to pray that the nefarious

plans to establish this Midrasha be frustrated. Why such a reaction against a rabbinical seminary? Because the zealots smelled therein the winds of modernism, such as: the teaching of Jewish philosophy (now renamed, “Jewish Ethics” or “Musar”), rhetoric and homiletics, Jewish history, and Hebrew. How dangerous, how defiling to the purity of faith! And how unfortunately self-defeating is this entire effort, for never before was an enlightened Rabbinate as necessary for a country as it is for Israel today!

In both cases, the right wing of religious Jewry was valiantly fighting the battles of 25 and 100 years ago with the means appropriate for 200 years ago.

At times the issues are even more consequential. It hurts me to mention it from this pulpit. I refer to the National Voluntary Service for Girls. Everyone agrees that no girl should be required to enlist in the Army. That is not the problem. The problem is whether the government may set up a voluntary system for religious girls to do their national service in orphanages, hospitals, schools, and outlying kibbutzim where they will be teachers. No one demands of girls who lead a very sheltered existence, and not permitted by their parents to work in offices and factories, that they volunteer (or, certainly, be forced) to enter such service. All that was proposed was that the government set up the machinery to allow and encourage such kind of voluntary service by religious girls. Here the right wing over-reacted in an incredible manner. Such volunteering was prohibited and declared *ויהרג ואל יעבור*, one must rather submit to death than to volunteer. Volunteering for national duty was thus categorized as *גילוי עריות*, a major infraction of Jewish morality. A Rosh Yeshiva in America announced his decision: parents of girls of twelve years and over may not go on Aliyah. I confess to you that I am embarrassed merely to mention what was done and the positions that were taken, even without passing my personal judgment upon them. Merely to state the case is to condemn it. Can you imagine what this says by inference to those young ladies, from religious homes and themselves pious, who saw it as their national obligation to volunteer such service – how offensively tasteless is this attack on their integrity and their morality? As a result, the very slight kernel of truth in the argument of the right wing has long been lost – and an enormous *חלול השם* has been let loose upon the country.

A constant source of friction in which, on balance, I believe the religious side comes out better than the

non-religious, is that of autopsies. Clearly, a certain level of autopsies is necessary for medical progress. Certainly, as communications increase and conditions in society change, it is necessary for halakhic authorities to reinvestigate the guidelines which will make autopsies in individual cases either prohibited or permissible or obligatory. But Israeli law at the present time permits autopsies to be performed without the family’s consent or without the consent of the person during his lifetime. Such is not the case in any enlightened democracy such as the United States or Britain where consent is necessary.

The result of this coercion has been a series of crank threats against the lives of pathologists and the harassment of these physicians. Amazingly, the reaction of the pathologists has been to go on strike and to close various hospitals for varying periods of time. Such a non-professional attitude would be inconceivable in New York. Can one imagine that the Police Department will go out on strike because some anonymous letters were received calling them obscene names and threatening them? Everyone seems to have gone slightly mad.

Yet, as I have said, on balance the religious side comes out better. The argument of the pathologists for the continuation of the law which allows them to perform autopsies at their own discretion and without obtaining family consent, is that if it were voluntary, no more than 10%-20% would allow autopsies to be performed. But does this not just precisely prove the opposite of their point? It means that a small group of professional experts, namely pathologists, wish to coerce the overwhelming majority of the country – from 80%-90% by their own estimate – to do something against the will of this majority, even if it is for the benefit of the entire population. This is a form of benevolent scientific Fascism. The job of the pathologists is not to seek to coerce others by law, but to educate the population to volunteer and cooperate with them. Our response to the pathologists must be, “educate but do not operate.”

The “Who is a Jew” issue is another one in which the religious side has the far greater merit. The Knesset has agreed that the definition of Jewishness must be largely halakhic: that one is a Jew only if he is born to a Jewish mother or converted. The problem remains with the omission of the words: “...converted – according to the Halakhah.” What the Knesset has done is to affirm a proper principle, but leave the door wide open for invalid

conversions performed mostly by Reform rabbis in the United States. This represents a real problem, and one must agree with the Lubavitcher Rebbe's major thrust in demanding an amendment to the law (adding the words "according to the Halakhah"), even if one is willing to question some of his techniques or political ramifications and demands. We are here speaking of our very identity as Jews, and the point is therefore a profoundly psychological and spiritual one, as well as a legal technical one.

Interestingly, at the recent Zionist Congress, both Mrs. Meir and the leader of the opposition, Mr. Menachem Begin, firmly declared that in their opinion there ought to be no separation between Jewish nationality and the Jewish religion.

As a result of these tensions, we have been witness to escalation, polarization, radicalization, and an upsurge of שנאת חיים, of largely unnecessary and improper hostility and hatred.

Many religious Jews are convinced that the majority is unredeemable. They look upon the major part of our people in Israel as, "The Enemy." There is a tendency on the part of the entire religious community to allow the extreme rightists of Bnai Brak and Meah Shearim to dictate policy for the rest of us. A "domino" situation is developing, whereby Brisk and Satmar are the ones who influence those closest to them and so on, so that the entire religious community often falls into line because of their influence.

The secularist side evinces progressive deJudaization, a process so complete that many of the businessmen of Tel Aviv or the youngsters at discotheques in Haifa would, if not for the Hebrew language, be indistinguishable from any other thoroughly assimilated Jews throughout the world – and some of them have such hardened anti-religious attitudes, that in the mouth of a gentile it would faintly smell of anti-Semitism.

So, instead of a Kulturkampf of a rational and sane dialogue, we have a clash in hatred, irrationality, and paranoia. The right wing, the religious extremists, are unaware of the existence of a new world, new problems, and new challenges, and they become more and more recessive and separatist. And the secular side becomes more and more insensitive and unaware of the consequences of their position. They do not understand Judaism. They see every religious deed as having an ulterior motive. Sometimes I think that in the eyes of an Israeli secularist Jew, when a religious Jew prays Minhah, it is interpreted as a purely

political act. They are unaware that – as I told The World Conference of Synagogues in Jerusalem some two or three weeks ago – the world Jewish community is today in the midst of a שואה רוחנית חשאית, a silent spiritual Holocaust of assimilation. More recently a historian calculated that if not for assimilation – not persecution, just assimilation – we would today number not 11 million, but 140-150 billion Jews throughout the world!

This hardening of the lines reveals itself in a development of a new national sport in Israel which threatens to displace soccer from its position of eminence: a demand for flexibility from the rigid Rabbis, a protest against the changelessness of Halakhah, while loftily and unquestioningly assuming the eternal rightness of Israeli secularist policy, and assuming that Zionist dogma endureth forever.

The Halakhah must permit everything – but no innovation or creative suggestion can be accepted for the Zionist Congress if it does not conform with the "Jerusalem Platform."

The Rabbis must abrogate a whole section of the Torah dealing with illegitimacy – but the call for an American aliyah, so relevant in the 40's and perhaps the 50's, and so irrelevant today with the great Russian immigration, is repeated as if it were a sacred litany.

Religious, Orthodox Jews are always declared to be narrow, but Zionist secular leadership is open-minded and enlightened and beyond such criticism – even when it disinvites a Nachum Goldman for daring to disagree with the party-line, even when it sends its police crashing in a brutal over-reaction against the rather peaceful Black Panthers and New Left demonstrating in Jerusalem.

Religious Jews are accused of provoking dissension, but the Zionist Congress is allowed to invite as one of its major speakers Prof. Albert Memmi, who, according to the JTA report, delivers himself of a tirade against Orthodoxy because it has the temerity to oppose mixed marriages.

I must regretfully report that a new issue is emerging which is even more painful and more embarrassing than the others we have mentioned so far. That is, the very serious problem of the desecration of the Sabbath. I do not intend by this the buses running on Shabbat in Haifa, or the overzealous Egged drivers who begin their trip from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem while the sun is still shining on Saturday. I refer, rather, to the right of the religious Jew not to be coerced to violate his conscience by desecrating the Sabbath in Israel.

The problem began to become serious when the present Minister of Labor, Mr. Almogi, began issuing היתרי עבודה, wholesale permits to keep factories open on the Sabbath. Orthodox Jews thus found themselves successively barred from various industries, especially the chemical industry, and from television and communications. Those who were already working there began to get the uneasy feeling that they were unwanted; those who applied for positions found all kinds of difficulties in their way.

I should like to make it clear: I am not speaking of פיקוח נפש situations, cases where the Sabbath must be violated because of matters of life and death, such as police or fire or hospitals. The government has gone beyond the פיקוח נפש criterion and permitted the desecration of the Sabbath for commercial reasons only. So that religious Jews today can be turned down from jobs in Israel because of their religious convictions, something which does not occur in London, Paris or New York. In the latter city, to discriminate against the Sabbath observer is a violation of the law with full penalty following.

Worse yet, such coercion to violate the Sabbath does not exist in Soviet Georgia! The Jews who have come from Georgia have decided to emigrate not because life is easier in Israel and not because they could not be Jews in Georgia – because they did live fairly comfortably, and in a thriving Jewish community where the Jewish tradition was observed without outside interference. Now these same Jews, when they try to obtain positions as porters in the airport at Lod, are punished, fired, and the director of the airport has the undiminished effrontery to demand that those seeking employment at Lod sign on the dotted line in advance that they will violate the Sabbath when asked to do so. Many of the Georgian Jews who came a year or two years ago have been forced to do just that, and as a result they attend Shabbat services at the crack of dawn and thereafter go to work in Lod. Many of the new emigres, as well as those who have come before, are broken-hearted and broken-spirited. They find that the move from Soviet Georgia to democratic Israel has resulted in a diminution of their freedom of religion rather than an expansion. And the Minister of Transportation, Mr. Peres, had the tastelessness and vulgarity to express surprise and astonishment that religious Jews would even seek employment in Lod. So we have the paradoxical and ironical and infuriating situation whereby religious Jews are becoming, in a manner of speaking, second-class citizens.

(The subsequent denials by Mr. Almogi are entirely unconvincing. I have personal knowledge of two cases – one an American girl and the other a Russian man – who experienced employment difficulties because of Shabbat.)

I wonder where are all those professors whose hearts go out to the underprivileged of other peoples, and where are all the professional liberals in Israel and the United States who rally to the cause of two people who could not marry because the taint of illegitimacy, or to the dozen or two dozen or three dozen כהנים who could not marry divorcees – where are they now when hundreds of religious Jews in Israel will be denied their first choice of employment merely because of their desire to observe Jewish Law? Or are civil liberties in Israel only to be invoked on behalf of the freedom to display pornography and obscenity, even as certain Jewish civil libertarians of the United States feel that human rights were meant to be invoked only for Blacks or Puerto Ricans, but never for Jews in Russia or the Jewish poor in New York?

Last Friday, a private citizen of Israel, an American immigrant, published a full page ad in the Jerusalem Post, Haaretz, and Maariv, which contained an Open Letter to Mrs. Meir, in which he mentioned some of the points we have just discussed. Haaretz, the most respected of the Establishment newspapers, which vigorously and aggressively expresses the secularist point of view, answered in an editorial which charged the writer with politics – a foolish charge because he belongs to no political party. More important, it concluded with the ominous message that Jews the world over must understand that the forms of Sabbath observance which prevailed in the Diaspora are not acceptable in the State of Israel.

So that Haaretz is now setting religious standards for the Jews of the world. It is telling us how we must observe Judaism if we wish to come to Israel and enjoy the full benefits of the country. We must remind Haaretz, and through it all of the secularist leadership in Israel, that the same kind of religious test was given to us in Europe after the Emancipation. We were told that if we wanted to enter the broader society of Western civilization, all we had to do is change the form of our religious observance – with or without Baptism. Many Jews who came in the great wave of immigration from Europe to the United States in the early years of this century, were urged to throw their tallit and tefillin into the ocean as they approached Ellis Island.

Those who submitted to these blandishments – many, many of their children and grandchildren are no longer with us; they are lost not only to Judaism, but to the Jewish people and to the State of Israel.

This is the low road for the Kulturkampf. It is most regrettable for me to say so, but I believe that whereas we once sought for a public posture for Judaism in the State of Israel, we now have fallen back to a narrower defensive line, and we must now forgo the public image of Judaism and fight at least for the rights of individual religious Jews not to suffer because of their Jewish commitments in the Jewish State.

So the lines are being drawn and the issues are serious, although the Kulturkampf seems to be more *kampf* than *kultur*.

However, I do not want to overdraw the picture. It would be a distortion to maintain that the situation is all shadow and no light. Indeed, the very existence of redeeming features imposes upon us the moral and Jewish obligation to make our contributions to the improvement of the situation. Whoever has eyes to see and ears to hear will notice the general dissatisfaction of the younger generation on the *kibbutzim* – and they are the ideological pace-setters for Israel – with the Marxist ideology that their parents have bequeathed to them. One notices a continuous search for Judaism, for Jewish values. There is a growing population of what we would call “Modern Orthodox” who are beginning to react against the submissiveness of the religious community to the extremes of both right and left. There is a religious academic community, a religious university, and *yeshivot* that are more open to life in Israel.

Now is the time to emphasize the *kultur* rather than the *kampf*, and to raise the dialogue to a higher level. As for the Israelis, they must learn to cut down on the extremism, on the rhetorical overkill, on the excessive politicization of life in Israel. They must emphasize similarities even while arguing differences.

We in the United States must not allow extremists in our own camp to push us into decisions and postures which are not really ours. We must recognize that many of the religious extremists in the United States have directed their activities not so much against Reform, or against the secularists, as against those who are Orthodox but somewhat to the left of them. Such policies can only prove suicidal. We must insist upon the independence of our critical judgment, and not be

coerced by the edict of any religious council that sets itself up as authoritative and infallible.

And we must openly and firmly reject the stifling and insensitive secularism of the majority. We will not be overawed by the majestic eminence of the Israeli government or Israel’s press representing, as they usually do, a secularist point of view. In all this, אהבת ישראל, the love of Israel, is vital; but rhetoric alone will offer no solution to our problems.

Positively, we must determine once and for all to build up the center, the middle ground. What we stand for must not be permitted to be crushed by either extreme. We must work powerfully for moderation. I do not mean that we must be moderate in our support of Torah; on the contrary, we must be passionate in our support of Torah – but we do not identify Torah with what is preached to us by Satmar or Brisk. We identify Torah as that of which it is written דרכיה דרכי נעם וכל נתיבותיה שלום, that “its ways are the ways of pleasantness and all its paths are peace.” We must rally to such causes that attempt to bridge the gap between both camps. I refer especially to groups such as Gesher, which I am pleased to report is making excellent progress. We must help such institutions as Midrasha which seeks to train rabbis with a greater breadth of outlook and greater efficiency to deal with a new and modern generation. We must give our support more and more to such *yeshivot* that allow its students to feel that they are not only in Israel but also of Israel, that are not averse to cooperating with an Army program (*hesder*) for their students. And these are only a few of the various causes and organizations that constitute a healthy middle sector.

The situation is tense and confusing but far from hopeless. Our tasks are difficult but we have a great and historic role to play. Above all, it is our task to show Torah in its true form, in its proper light.

There are many for whom the halakhic regimen seems unbearable and stifling. We must respect their feelings, but it is our moral and Jewish duty to teach them otherwise.

The great Hasidic teacher, author of “דגל מחנה” אפרים, makes the following comment on the verses in today’s portion which tell of the Children of Israel who complained about the bitter water which Moses then sweetened for them. Water, says our author, is a symbol of Torah. There are times when Torah seems bitter, restrictive, inhibiting. But really this is an indication not of the quality of Torah, but of the quality of the man. Honey tastes sweet,

but in the mouth of a sick man it often tastes bitter. So, one who finds Torah bitter is sick, and we must help cure him, not berate him. We must make every effort to give Torah a sweet and pleasant taste for the spiritual patient, by education and explanation and friendship.

The author then quotes his grandfather, the Besht. The founder of Hasidism said the following: in the Talmud we read that Jerusalem was destroyed על, שלא ברכו בתורה תחילה because they did not make a blessing over the Torah in the beginning. Why the word, תחילה, “in the beginning?” Do we not know that the blessings over the Torah are recited before the actual reading or the study of the Torah? The Besht answers that the reference is particularly to one word which comes at the very beginning of one of the major

blessings over the Torah: והערב נא ה' אלקינו את דברי תורתך, בפיו, “Make the words of the Torah sweet”... The problem with the sages of Jerusalem was that they forced Torah on the younger generation, they crammed it down the throats of those who were unwilling, they failed to emphasize והערב, to make Torah pleasant and sweet. And that is why Jerusalem was destroyed.

So was Jerusalem destroyed. Our task is now to rebuild Jerusalem, to contribute to the up-building of the Jewish people and the State of Israel, and to the renaissance of Torah in our days. And this we can do by emphasizing והערב, by making it sweet, and by teaching all our people that Torah in its fullness is a blessing.

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Confusion and Control

Dr. Erica Brown

Confusion can be a technique leaders use to maintain control. Confusion can create dependency on leaders because their followers simply do not understand what is expected of them or fail to comprehend the situation they are in. In this scenario, such leaders augment power because followers continue to look up to the leader for explanation and guidance.

Liz Wiseman, author of the book, *Multipliers: How the Best Leaders Make Everyone Smarter*, divides the leadership personality into multipliers and diminishers. Multipliers debate ideas and decisions with those around them. They don't provide easy answers and try, instead, to coax direction out of others and empower them. They challenge others to create an intense atmosphere that helps bring out people's best efforts. Multipliers also hold people accountable as a way to create ownership. They give others the credit and take the blame.

Diminishers are often tyrants or micromanagers who always know better than everyone else. But, as Wiseman discovered, many well-intentioned leaders can become diminishers unintentionally by “thinking too big” and expecting their teams to live up to their grandiose plans and vision without connecting the dots on how to actualize their dreams. Teams can feel disempowered and confused and lose enthusiasm. Diminishers can suffer from brainstorming too much without seeing things through, or involve themselves in every decision, creating dependency. Wiseman brings many examples of such individuals; they

often make abrupt and centralized decisions – because they have the authority to do so – and leave people confused and frustrated.

What diminishers fail to understand is that, psychologically speaking, every one needs to feel some degree of autonomy and control. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, in *The Dignity of Difference*, helps us understand what happens when we have little control:

At the core of our culture is the knowledge that too much of what happens to us is beyond our control, the result of economic choices or political decisions taken far away by people we will never meet nor be able to identify. Beyond the narrowing circle of the self lies a world in which we are not the makers but the made. This is the genesis of despair.

In this week's sedra, Beshalach, we find yet another example of a diminisher-in-chief: Pharaoh. He was a tyrant who made abrupt, centralized decisions to augment power, ignoring the welfare and safety of his people. He also thought that by exerting control, he could create the kind of confusion that would make the Israelites dependent on him. In a moment of curated magnanimity, Pharaoh finally allowed the Israelites to leave. The plagues were taking their toll. But he never believed they would find their way. As the Israelites were getting to the edge of the Reed Sea, God told Moses exactly what Pharaoh was thinking: “Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, ‘They are astray [*nevukhim*] in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them’ (Ex.14:3).

Rashi defines the word “*nevukhim*” as shut out or sunken and brings proof texts from Job (28:11, 38:16) and Psalms (84:7) that utilize water imagery. This makes sense because the Israelites were about to face a sea they could not cross; all their dreams of freedom would only take them to the bottom of an unforgiving ocean. Rashi continues to describe the confusion: “They are shut up in the wilderness so they don’t know how to get out or where to go.”

R. Abraham ibn Ezra defines “*nevukhim*” as entangled and perplexed and cites his own proof texts to support his reading. Perhaps the most famous example is in Esther 3:15 when Haman suggested that King Ahasuerus enact a decree to kill one nation among the 127 in his empire; this is yet another example of an abrupt, centralized decision that makes no sense and results in an expected consequence: “The city of Shushan was confused.” Ibn Ezra explains the tension in the word: those who suffer this confusion are “like a person who cannot find anyone to advise him and does not know what to do.”

Rashbam, Rashi’s grandson, cites his grandfather’s explanation and puts us in the heads of the Israelites at that terrifying moment. They were confused by the sea in front of them and a desert filled with scorpions and wild animals behind them. So they set up a camp where God told them to, but had no sense of a pathway forward: “Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea” (Ex. 14:2). God had them face the terror of the future in a state of confusion. Rashbam says that the word “*nevukhim*” describes the hopelessness they felt at having no options. “It describes people faced by insurmountable

obstacles to their continued progress.” Confusion like this could have fed straight into Pharaoh’s unchecked power. The Israelites would have to turn back to Egypt and re-enslave themselves under worse conditions or die trying to leave. Their confusion would have fed into Pharaoh’s control.

The people cry out, and Moses tries to quiet them, relying on the technicolor miracles and God’s salvific powers: “But Moses said to the people, ‘Have no fear! Stand by and witness the deliverance which God will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. God will battle for you; you hold your peace!’” (Ex. 14:13-14). All the verbs Moses uses are passive. The people are told to stand, to witness, to observe. God will fight every battle.

God, the ultimate Multiplier, however, has different plans. He empowered Moses and his followers so that they could learn that when facing confusion, they had to take control and charge forward: “Then God said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry out to Me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. And you lift up your rod and hold out your arm over the sea and split it, so that the Israelites may march into the sea on dry ground’” (Ex. 14:15-16). The rest is history.

One of the greatest stories of all time pits a Multiplier against a diminisher. The Multiplier’s victory is a victory for every one of God’s followers. The diminisher’s loss turns into a death warrant for his followers. Every one of us has multiplier and diminisher tendencies in life and in leadership. This week’s Torah reading reminds us to be multipliers and to apply that mindset when we’re stuck, confused and unsure.

So, are you more of a diminisher or more of a multiplier?

Just Passing Through

Rabbi Joshua (The Hoffer) Hoffman z”l

The Torah tells us that when the Israelites left Egypt, Moshe took Yosef’s bones with him, because Yosef had imposed an oath on his brothers, to have their descendants take his remains with them when they were redeemed, and bury him in the land of Canaan. The Mechilta tells us that although the rest of the people were busy carrying the riches they had received from the Egyptians, Moshe acted with chassidus, or piety, and wisdom and carried Yosef’s remains. Rav Avrohom Pam, zt”l, noted that although it is obvious why the midrash describes Moshe’s action as coming from piety, it is not so

clear why it describes him as acting out of wisdom. Rav Pam explains that according to the midrash, the Yam Suf split only upon seeing the coffin of Yosef. This is derived from a verse in Tehillim (114:3), which says, “the sea saw and fled.” The rabbis explain that what it saw was the coffin of Yosef. Because Yosef fled when the wife of Potiphar tried to seduce him, says the midrash, the sea split when it saw Yosef’s coffin. If Moshe would not have carried Yosef’s remains, but, rather, carried off the riches from Egypt, as everyone else did, then when the Egyptians came, the sea would not have split, and the Egyptians would have caught

up with the fleeing nation, and taken back all of its riches. Through his wisdom, then, Moshe saved the wealth they had brought from Egypt. We need to understand, however, what it was about Yosef that generated sufficient merit to have the sea split and thereby rescue the nation.

Actually, there is another midrash which says that the sea split because of the merit of bris milah, which the people had undergone before bringing the Passover sacrifice. This is derived from a verse in Tehillim (136:13) “To Him who divided the Yam Suf into parts, for His kindness endures forever.” The word for parts, ‘gezorim,’ is read here as ‘gizrim,’ or those who were circumcised. There are, moreover, a number of customs practiced at bris milah that reflect this midrash. For example, in some congregations, the father of the infant leads the morning prayers, and recites Az Yashir, the song that was sung in praise of God after the splitting of the sea, and is a regular part of the morning service, in a responsive manner, as it was sung at the time of it was originally said. Another custom is to sing, at the meal following the bris milah, Rav Yehudah HaLevi’s poem “Yam LeYabasha,” which deals with the crossing of the sea. At first blush, this midrash seems to contradict the previous midrash we mentioned, according to which it was because of Yosef’s merit that the sea split. However, I believe that these two midrashim are actually complementary of each other, and, taken together, provide us with a fuller picture of Yosef’s role in the redemption process.

Rabbi Yosef Leib Sofer, in his work *Yalkut Sofer*, cites the midrash which says that the sea split due to the merit of bris milah, and offers a number of explanations. The final suggestion he makes is that bris milah is an identification sign for the Jewish nation. As we noted in our message to parshas Shemos this year, this is the second explanation of the purpose of bris milah given by the Rambam in his

Guide for the Perplexed, and the basic purpose, according to Rabbi Dovid Tzvi Hoffmann in his commentary to parshas Tazria. Perhaps we can speculate that it was Yosef’s own bris milah that reminded him of his Jewish identity at his moment of crisis, and led him to conjure up his father’s image, which, the rabbis tell us, ultimately prevented him from succumbing to his tempter’s charms. Rabbi Sofer adds that this identification mark is also a reflection of the unity of the Jewish nation, and that it was this unity that helped bring about the redemption. Although Rabbi Sofer does not mention this, it was, in fact, the split between Yosef and his brothers that began the process which generated the exile in Egypt, as pointed out by the Talmud in Shabbos (10b). When Yosef had his brothers swear that they would arrange for his eventual burial in their homeland, he was taking a further step in the process of reconciliation that he began after revealing his true identity to them. By carrying Yosef’s bones in front of the people as they left Egypt, Moshe was reminding them of the need for unity in forming a nation bound to the Torah. The manner in which the sea was split, as well, reflected the need for national unity. The midrash explains the verse we mentioned above, which speaks of the splitting of the sea into parts, as meaning that that when the sea split, it formed twelve separate paths, one for each tribe. At the same time, each tribe was also able to see all of the other ones through the clear water. Thus, the need for each tribe to follow its own path, while at the same time retaining its connection to the nation as a whole, was brought out though the splitting of the sea. It was, then, this combination of bris milah as a sign of Jewish identity and unity, and the image of Yosef as the restorer of Jewish unity, that led to the splitting of the sea in a manner that brought out the need for unity, as well.

Just Around the Bend

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted by a talmid from the YUTorah shiur originally given at Gruss Kollel in Yerushalayim on Jan 13, 2022)

In this week’s Parsha, we have a very peculiar pasuk. Just after the story of the sweetening of Mei Marah, the Torah tells us: *Va-yavo’u Eilimah ve-sham shteim esrei einos mayim ve-shiv’im temarim va-yachanu sham al ha-mayim.* They came to Eilim, and they found there twelve springs and seventy fig-bearing palm trees—and they encamped there

by the waters. Which is very nice and all, but we are not sure exactly what we are supposed to learn from this. It just was a place they stopped. So why is it so important for the Torah to count the springs and the palm trees?

Ibn Ezra explains that unlike Mei Marah, where the water was bitter, here was a delightful place with water and

palm trees. And this shows us the chesed of Hashem.

The Ramban goes a little further. He quotes a Medrash also mentioned by Rashi that the twelve springs were parallel to the twelve Shevatim, and the seventy palm trees were parallel to the Shiviim Zekeinim. And he suggests that this implies that there was a special Hashgacha Pratis on Klal Yisroel at the time. Hashem is machshiv Klal Yisroel—He didn't just bring us to some place decent enough to survive. He gave us twelve springs for each Shevet to have its own spring. And He gave us exactly seventy palm trees so that each of the seventy Zekeinim could have his own palm tree to sit under, where people would come to get guidance. So perhaps it's demonstrating Hashgacha Pratis. It's not just that we found a wonderful place in the desert, but it was tailor made for us. Hashem knew that we would have twelve Shevatim and Shiviim Zekeinim. And it shows that nothing happens stam—everything is for a reason. And in this case, the reason was the structure and leadership of the Jewish People.

But the Chafetz Chaim has a beautiful insight that's so simple, yet so profound. What happened right before this? The Jews went for three days in the Midbar and did not find water. And then they came to Marah, found the water there to be bitter, and they complained. That's the story of our life. We go about our lives. We don't get exactly what we want. Things don't work out exactly how we think they should. So we are disappointed and complain to Hashem. But the Chafetz Chaim points out that people are sometimes shortsighted. What happened in the very next pasuk? Va-yavo'u Eilima. Not that they encamped or traveled for a long time after leaving Marah. They must have walked only a few kilometers. And right after they left the place where they complained, they arrived in Eilim. And not only was there enough water for everyone—fresh, delicious water—but palm trees grew there too—with extra fruits to sweeten the deal. Just around the bend was exactly what they were

looking for. The Chafetz Chaim explains that everything has a plan. Everything is min-ha-Shomayim. Perhaps, just around the bend—in five minutes, a day, a week, or a month, Hashem has exactly what we need and want! But we don't have it right now, and we complain—Hashem, where are you? Hashem, what's wrong with You? Hashem, why are you not keeping your side of the deal? Maybe we need to accomplish just a little more and build ourselves just a little higher, and then the Promised Land—everything we want—is just waiting for us when we get there. Neither I nor the Chafetz Chaim, can tell you how long any individual has to wait in any particular situation. However, when we come to the trials and tribulations, disappointments, and challenges of life, we should remember the Chafetz Chaim and the Ramban here. Even if things are not working out now, have a little more patience. Maybe just around the bend, in the near future—whether it's our Geulah or my geulah—Hashem's plan will come to fruition. Achakeh lo b'chol yom she-yavo. Maybe it's all going to make sense, and I will see that it was all for a good reason. I just need to wait a little more—have a little more patience and do what I need to do, and fix whatever I need to fix, grow what I need to grow, to get there having done what I need to accomplish. And maybe when I get there, I will see shteim esreh einot mayim ve-shiv'im temarim—that everything was prepared exactly for me, that nothing just happens stam, that everything happens because every person and every group needs to be exactly where they are. And maybe this will give us chizuk in our hard times that whenever things seem to be going wrong, and we wait and wait, and when we finally think we are there, yet we are frustrated, and everything is bitter, perhaps the sweet water and sumptuous fruits are waiting for us just around the bend. And we need to be mechazek ourselves just a little bit to take a few more steps, do a few more mitzvos, and staick to the right path until we get there. Shabbat Shalom.

The Plishtim or the Sea?

Rabbi Hershel Reichman

The parsha begins with a strange opening: “When Pharaoh sent out the people, Hashem did not send them through the land of the Plishtim even though it was close [to Eretz Yisrael] because, He said, ‘Perhaps the people will regret leaving Egypt when they see war, and they will return to Mitzrayim.’”

This pasuk is puzzling. Back in Parshas Shemos, Moshe Rabbeinu had his first encounter with Hashem at the burning bush, where God said to him, “*V'zeh l'cha ha'os ki anochi sh'lachticha, b'hotzi'acha es ha'am mi'Mitzrayim ta'avdun es haElokim al hahar hazeh.* You are the one who has to do this, because you will be My messenger when the

people come to Har Sinai to serve Me” (Shemos 3:12).

Additionally, in the four words that Hashem used to describe the redemption of the Jews, the four leshonos of *ge’ula*, Hashem told Moshe that He would take Bnei Yisrael as His people. Their acceptance of the Torah was the fulfillment of the promise of *v’lakachti eschem li l’am*. Why, then, does the Torah say that Hashem considered sending Bnei Yisrael through the land of the Plishtim? While it might be a faster route to Eretz Yisrael, it would skip Har Sinai, where they would receive the Torah and become Hashem’s chosen people!

Moreover, the Torah says that Bnei Yisrael did not traverse the land of the Plishtim because they might be afraid when they see war and return to Egypt. But if the whole point of leaving Mitzrayim was to become the people of God by accepting the Torah, wouldn’t the need to go to Har Sinai first be the reason to avoid the shortcut through Eretz Plishtim? Why does the Torah give a different reason? Going to war with the Plishtim would be a moot point if it would mean Bnei Yisrael wouldn’t become Hashem’s people. That is the real reason why Hashem took them on the detour into the desert away from Eretz Yisrael, not because of a concern lest they return to Egypt.

What Did Bnei Yisrael Do to Merit the Exodus?

The Shem Mishmuel explains one of the fundamental questions of *yetzias Mitzrayim*. What merit of the Jewish People warranted this exodus? God changed the fundamentals of natural law for the benefit of the Jewish People. Water turned to blood, darkness came, all Egyptian firstborns died while no Jews died. Of course, the Jews had the merit of their avos Avraham, Yitzchak, and Yaakov.

But God doesn’t change the world for people living today just because of people who lived hundreds of years earlier. God would not make miracles for people who would not be helped by them. Clearly, there was something in the generation of the Exodus that made them worthy of these miracles.

As described in Parshas Shemos, Moshe initially resisted serving as Hashem’s emissary to bring about the redemption. He wanted to know what the purpose of the Exodus would be. Hashem responded that it would be in order for them to serve God on Har Sinai—that they receive the Torah. These slaves, weak as they were spiritually, possessed untapped potential. Through their exodus from Egypt and their march through the desert,

something would develop within them. They would rise to the occasion and deserve the Torah. This potential, which does in part come from the avos, grew as a direct result of their experience of slavery. In addition to their fathers’ merit, their own experience as slaves made them ready to be sanctified at Har Sinai and receive the holy Torah.

There’s a famous Yiddish vort: It’s easier to take the Jew out of Egypt than it is to take Egypt out of the Jew. The slavery in Egypt had a double meaning. First, it was a physical situation in which the Jewish People were captive for more than 200 years. They were subjected to the brutal effects of the slave regime. But these years affected them in a deeper, more insidious way as well. Culturally, they became Egyptian. At the sea, the Midrash says, the angels protested: “Both of these groups, the Egyptians and the Jews, are serving idols. Why are You saving the Jews and drowning the Egyptians?” Imagine—at the sea, in crisis, the Jews took out their idols! This mistaken idea of other gods had penetrated to the depths of their psyche. They were idol worshippers and pagans. When crisis met them at the sea, they reverted to their old ways. The angels could not understand the merit of the Jews over the Egyptians. Even though the Jews had been physically freed, and Pharaoh had issued a proclamation to that effect, their cultural enslavement persisted.

The Midrash emphasizes that when the Jews left Egypt, Pharaoh sent out the nation: *b’shalach Pharaoh*. Pharaoh did not just allow them to leave—he accompanied them on their way out. He gave them a farewell parade. This meant that Pharaoh and the Egyptians who came to the parade felt that the free Jews would capture Canaan but would maintain loyalty to the Egyptian empire, like the British colonists who conquered land but stayed loyal to the Empire. The Jews were so emotionally attuned to their host country that they would remain within the governing network of Egypt.

This was a fundamental problem in the exodus from Egypt. How could Bnei Yisrael become culturally free from their long experience in Egypt?

The Fear Necessary to Receive the Torah

The Gemara (Brachos 22a) says that the experience of Har Sinai was with *eima*, *yira*, *reses*, *v’zei’a*. When the Jews finally did arrive at Sinai to receive the Torah from God, they felt fear, trepidation, shaking, and perspiration. In other words, fear of God was the core experience. They felt an awareness of the oneness of Hashem and were

overcome with awe. Without that emotion, they could not possibly receive the Torah.

The Torah is not just a book of laws or history. It is an experience of God. Chazal say that when the Jews stood at Sinai, heaven came down to earth. Hashem opened the gates of heaven so that everyone could see how all the parts of the world are connected. In order to experience such a phenomenon, people had to focus on the uniqueness of God. People who worship idols or hold other kinds of beliefs are incapable of receiving the mitzvos. People like that would not be able to internalize the awareness of Hashem, His unity, and His uniqueness. The Torah is an experience of Hashem. As the pasuk states, “Those of you who are connected to Hashem are alive” (Devarim 4:4). The rest are spiritually dead, and spiritually dead people cannot receive the Torah.

This was a tremendous problem that faced Hashem and

Moshe. How would they change this mindset of the slaves? They had spent more than 200 years in Egypt, with its worship of many different gods, including the worship of Pharaoh as an eternal god-person. They had built pyramids in honor of these strange gods and for Pharaoh to continue to live on within them after death. They had put tables, chairs, and beds inside the pyramids.

The Egyptians placed food in front of the dead body of Pharaoh so it would be able to eat. They believed that Pharaoh somehow would stay alive after death and guide their country. How could the Jewish People escape these idolatrous beliefs so that they would be able to accept the Torah?

The Vitality of Torah to the World’s Existence

The Gemara (Shabbos 88a) says that receiving the Torah was critical for the entire world. Hashem had made a condition when He created the world: If the Jews accept the Torah, the world would be fine. Otherwise, the world would revert to *tohu va’vohu*, total nothingness.

Our tradition teaches us that twenty-six generations lived from the time of creation until the Torah was given. Twenty-six is the gematriya of the sheim Havaya. This name of Hashem refers to the midda of chesed. Hashem kept the world alive for twenty-six generations without the people of the world deserving it. He maintained the world through chesed. But the time to earn life had finally arrived. The world had to justify its existence.

Hashem always deals with everyone in the world with a combination of chesed and din, a free pass and paying for

the ticket. If you can pay for the ticket, then you shouldn’t get it for free. But Hashem knows that a world with only din is too difficult for the average human being. So, Hashem begins His relationship with people using chesed. Even people who don’t deserve it get a free pass. But later on, the chesed has to switch to din.

Hashem had waited twenty-six generations for the world to reach the point at which people would deserve the blessings of the world. The Jews had to accept the Torah. This would justify all of God’s creation, from the smallest blade of grass to the vast distances of the galaxies and stars, and all the rules of nature. All of this wonderful universe was created so that, one day, people would deserve it through the Torah and their self-perfection. Without the Torah, the world is basically a useless endeavor and should disappear.

Hashem showers chesed first. Hashem created the world before people started doing mitzvos. He put man into Gan Eden before he ever did a good deed. Hashem starts with us with pure beneficence. But as time goes on, Hashem wants us to switch to the track of din.

Twenty-six is a mystical number of chesed. The twenty-six generations from Adam until Moshe were sustained through chesed. Despite idolatry, promiscuity, outright murder, and theft, God kept giving the world the energy to continue, with tremendous blessings of life and food. But God knew that the time would come to switch gears, for people to deserve God’s blessings and to justify their lives. When Bnei Yisrael accepted the Torah at Har Sinai, the whole world switched onto the track of din. When the Jews accepted the Torah, they ushered in a new era.

False Gods, False Goals

But the Jews were culturally Egyptians. The Egyptian worldview doesn’t place God in the center. It has many false ideals and goals. In those days, those goals included accumulating idols and worshiping Pharaoh. Today, it is accumulating wealth, and other notions of success. Whatever the false values are, they drive out the core purpose of this world—to see God in every experience of ours. So how could the Jews, who were so foreign in their mindset to Judaism, go to Sinai? According to Chassidus, Egyptians regularly committed the three cardinal sins. They were murderers. They threw Jewish babies into the river. They committed other horrors, although we won’t go into details here. We know the Egyptians also acted lustfully. We know how the wife of Potifar tried to seduce Yosef, and that she was not alone in her promiscuity. As

Rashi explains in the context of *makkas bechoros*, “*Ein bayis asher ein sham meis*. There was no house in which an Egyptian person did not die” (Shemos 12:30), because women had more than one “firstborn child” due to their unfaithfulness to their husbands. Egypt was full of terrible licentiousness. There was a total moral breakdown.

Chassidus and Kabbala scrutinize the phrase that Yosef told the brothers when they first arrived in Egypt. “*Ervas ha’aretz basem liros*” (Bereishis 42:12), Yosef tells them. You have come to a naked land, a place with a breakdown of all morality. This is the country and worldview that the Jews lived in. But they had to get this culture out of themselves in order to receive the Torah.

Leaving Egypt Behind

Leaving Egypt physically would not be enough; the Jewish people had to get Egypt out of their minds, psychologically. They couldn’t think of their idols or women as Egyptians thought of them. How would Hashem create a different mentality for them? They couldn’t go to *matan Torah* straight from Egypt. Receiving the Torah under such circumstances would have been an external, *pro forma* act, but it couldn’t be an essential acceptance of the Torah in all of its spirit and perspective. This was the key challenge, to imbue the Jewish people with *eima*, *yira*, *reses*, and *zei’a*—the fear of God, the feeling of awe, of being overwhelmed by His presence.

How could the Jewish people be purified mentally, psychologically, sociologically, and culturally? Pharaoh had escorted the people out of Egypt, thus reasserting his psychological and spiritual control over the people. How would they drive out their fear and awe of the idols and deities of Egypt, including the great deity Pharaoh? How would they develop a fear of the true God?

Hashem, in His infinite wisdom, devised a plan. Before He would take Bnei Yisrael to Sinai, the first thing He would do would be to take them to the land of the Plishtim on the coast of Eretz Yisrael. They must confront the Plishtim and, if they succeeded, then they would be able to go to Sinai.

Plishti Pathos

The Plishtim are an enigmatic people. Of all the nations of Canaan, the Plishtim interact most with the Jews. Starting from the times of Avraham and Yitzchak, the Torah describes many interactions with them. In Tanach, we see the Plishtim as the great enemy of the Jews in Eretz Yisrael. The great battle of the young Dovid and the giant Goliath is the classic battle between the Jews and the Plishtim. They

attacked the Jewish People many times during King Shaul’s reign. They captured the aron in the time of the prophet Shmuel. The shofet Shimshon’s entire life was a battle against the Plishtim. The Plishtim were fighting with the Jews from the time of Avraham all the way through King Dovid and afterwards. This is more than 800 years of conflict!

Who were the Plishtim and where did they come from? They came from an island called Kaftor, perhaps Cypress. Rav Ahron Soloveitchik z”l noted that the Plishtim never developed a written alphabet. They did not read; they spoke and fought. They were a warrior nation, illiterate and anti-intellectual. They were the antithesis of the Torah, for which the intellect is the crown of the human being, the power of human thought and expression. The ability to read and write Torah is absolutely critical. Why did they confront us so much? The Shem Mishmuel explains that we notice a certain cultural milieu that defines Plishti culture. They were a culture of cynics, *leitzanim*. Shimshon was killed in a gruesome, mocking theater. He was blinded and put on display and laughed at by the crowds. They laughed at him until they died in the building he leveled. The *midda* of the Plishtim is *sechok*, derision in its worst form, the antithesis of *yiras Hashem*. In *Mishlei*, Shlomo writes repeatedly that the opposite force to Torah is the *leitz*, the scoffer. The *apikores*, the enemy of Hashem, is the person who ridicules the Torah and makes a joke of religion. The scoffing and ridiculing and making fun is the antithesis of what Hashem wants. He wants us to feel a sense of responsibility and the awesomeness of what it means to be a human being. He wants us to feel the responsibility of all that God has given us, the *ol malchus shamayim*, the yoke of the kingdom of heaven. But the scoffer rejects all of this. He just wants to have a good time. Nothing is sacred to the *leitz*. He will make fun of the blind and mock the cripple and the handicapped. He will make light of everything sacred.

In our time, so much of our public entertainment is making fun of the sacred. This kind of humor is the main enemy of the Torah and Am Yisrael. Amalek wants to physically destroy the Jew. As horrendous as Amalek is, the Plishti is also horrific. The Plishti is the destruction of the Jewish mindset, of looking at the world through Torah lenses. The Plishti says that the world is a big joke, that we don’t have responsibilities. We take for ourselves and we don’t have to pay any price for it. We take and have a good time and step on anyone in our way. The Plishti is a scoffer and mocker, the antithesis of Torah.

Plishti Fun, Jewish Fun

The problem was that the Jews thought like Egyptians; they had an Egyptian mindset. How would they prepare themselves for Sinai? Hashem considered sending them marching towards the Plishtim to see what goes on there. Let them see the promiscuity of the streets there, the Delilah movie stars. This is Plishti fun! In the land of the Plishtim, fun is the goal. But it is false fun. The Torah is also fun, although it is a different kind of sechok.

As Sara Imeinu described her happiness upon receiving the blessing of a son, “*Tzechok asah li Elokim*, Hashem made me laugh” (Bereishis 21:6). The Torah is holy fun. God gives us the pleasure of Torah, a sweet, deep, and true pleasure. It is not the destructive scoffing of the Plishtim. The Jews should see what terrible things come out of the Plishtim. See how the handicapped are stepped on. See how the sick are left to die with no one to care for them. See how they have a culture too busy for reading and writing because they are busy fighting wars, fighting to the death. This was also true of the Roman gladiators in the arenas of Rome. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael to see this Plishti lifestyle and reject it.

According to the Shem Mishmuel, Plishti culture was the mother of Egyptian culture. Egypt had responsibility to the empire. In order to preserve their empire, the Egyptians had certain rules and regulations. But the Plishtim were unbridled by responsibility. They just wanted to have fun without thinking of consequences.

We now live in a world where we have epidemics like AIDS. People just want to have fun without responsibility. They don't think of the consequences. The Torah wants every step of the person to be under his logical control, with a sense of responsibility—for myself, for my heritage, and for my environment. Plishti culture is the ultimate *ervas ha'aretz*, the nakedness of the world. “Let the Bnei Yisrael go to that land and see how bad it is,” said Hashem. Then they would be ready to go to Har Sinai to receive the Torah.

However, Plishti culture is very powerful. It compromised even the great Shimshon. He had *ruach Elokim*, God's spirit, beating within him, yet was still overcome by the machinations of the Plishti woman Delilah.

So, Hashem changed His original plan, which had been for Bnei Yisrael to travel through Eretz Plishtim, which would prepare them for Har Sinai next. Hashem was concerned lest they “see war,” i.e., see the war-culture of the Plishtim, and thus they would “return to Egypt” (meaning

the cultural mindset of Egypt), rather than feeling antipathy towards it. If they would go to Eretz Plishtim, the people might succumb to the Plishti culture, with no responsibility but pleasure. This is the antithesis of Torah, and the Jews had absorbed a similar culture in Egypt. The culture was too familiar to them to oppose it. They were not strong enough to recognize the Plishti culture as the evil that it truly was.

Plan B—Yam Suf

Hashem therefore took the people back to Yam Suf, back towards Egypt. The Jews were weak, and they may actually have wanted to return to Egypt. Hashem told Moshe the secret. Going back towards Egypt would be a temptation for Pharaoh and his henchman to take off their amiable masks. Pharaoh made a great parade to escort them out, hoping that the Jews would want to stay on as a part of his empire.

Now the plan was to tempt Pharaoh, who would say, “The Jews are lost in the desert. *Nevuchim heim ba'aretz*. We can now fight them and bring them back to Egypt.” Pharaoh truly was a tyrant. His facade of friendship was just a charade to keep the Jews cultural captives. Pharaoh fell for the bait and rushed to attack. When the Jews stood at Yam Suf, they feared Pharaoh. They saw that Pharaoh was coming to take them back as slaves. They realized that the farewell parade was a farce. It was just another way of keeping the shackles of Egypt upon them. Pharaoh was betraying their trust. He showed himself as nothing but a petty tyrant. They realized that Pharaoh didn't love Jews, he wanted to enslave them. They understood that they had to abandon all of their previous thinking. Pharaoh and Egypt were coming against them to capture them and make them slaves once again.

They cried to Hashem. These were revolutionary cries of a people who at that moment abandoned their previous worldview to become His servants. *Vayire'u ha'am es Hashem*—they truly feared Hashem. *Vaya'aminu ba'Hashem uv'Moshe avdo*—they absolutely believed in Hashem and in Moshe his servant (Shemos 14:31).

The excruciating experience at Yam Suf was critical and defining for Am Yisrael. It completed the Exodus because it completed their deliverance culturally, mentally, and spiritually from Egypt. A week earlier, Bnei Yisrael had physically walked out of Egypt. At the sea, they attained a spiritual personal freedom. This is why the holiday of Pesach has two *yamim tovim*: the first day, when they left

Egypt physically, and the seventh day, when they crossed the Yam Suf. The first day marks the physical exodus from Egypt. The seventh marks the spiritual exodus. On the

first day, Hashem took us out, and on the seventh day, the Jewish People took themselves out. They decided to have a new way of thinking, an Am Hashem way of thinking.

The One Who Sees The Good

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

In this week's parsha, Parshas Beshalach, many events of significance are recorded. Having just left Egypt, the Israelites are miraculously saved at the Sea of Reeds when the Egyptians drown in the churning waters, while Am Yisrael crosses safely to the other side. In response to this salvation, the people sing the Song of the Sea, which we recite each day in the Pesudei d'Zimrah of Shachris. Other events of note are the people thirsting for water, the manna falling for the first time, and the attack of Amalek against the newly freed slaves.

The pasuk tells us that after the nation journeyed from the Sea of Reeds, *וַיֵּלְכוּ שְׁלֹשֶׁת-יָמִים בַּמִּדְבָּר, וְלֹא-מָצְאוּ מַיִם* - *and they traveled three days in the desert and they did not find water*; *עַל-כֵּן; וַיָּבִיאוּ מַרְתָּה--וְלֹא יָכְלוּ לְשָׁתוֹת מִמֵּי מַרְתָּה, כִּי מָרִים הֵם;* *and they came to Marah, and they could not drink the water from Marah, because they were bitter, therefore its name was called Marah*; *וַיִּלְנוּ הָעָם עַל-מֹשֶׁה לֵאמֹר, מַה-נִּשְׁפָּתָה* - *and the nation complained against Moshe, saying: What will we drink?* (Shemos 15:22-24).

Rav Yaakov Bender shlita writes, "From the moment the nation left Egypt until it emerged from the sea, the people witnessed a string of miracles - a nation of slaves transformed and uplifted into the realm of princes, a chosen nation.

"As they traveled in the desert, the people thirsted for water. It was a seemingly reasonable complaint - a person needs water to live, and in fact, HKB"H provided sweet waters after they complained.

"Later in the parsha, as they traveled to Refdim, again there was 'no water to drink.' They complained a second time, and Moshe got upset. 'Just a little more, and they will stone me!' he called out to Hashem (17:4). The RS"O doesn't seem to agree with Moshe's perspective, and He instructs Moshe how to get water for the people. *לָמָּה לְמַעַן עַל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל לְעוֹת עִלְוֹתָי* - *Why do you slander My children?*' Hashem asks Moshe (Rashi to 17:5). Hashem doesn't just defend the nation, He expresses His love for them in calling them *בְּנֵי*, My children.

"But the truth is, wasn't Moshe correct? How could a

nation that saw so many miracles doubt that their Creator would provide for them? He had taken them out, carried them on eagle's wings above their enemies, surrounded them by Clouds of Glory, and created paths for them through a stormy sea ... Surely, He would give them water to drink! And yet, they complained. Why wasn't Moshe's perspective valid?" (Rav Yaakov Bender on Chumash v.2, p.119-120).

Rav Bender answers that instead of focusing on the complaints of the nation, Hashem was focusing on the positive aspects of the nation. The lesson to Moshe - and to all of us - is to strive to find the aspect of good in every negative situation. True, now they complained, but before that, they went for three long days without water, and without complaining. This is what the RS"O chose to focus on.

Rav Bender writes, "The Bnei Yisrael traveled for three days with no water. Three days! That is a long time to go uncomplainingly and Hashem saw this. He did not focus on the complaint, but on the long journey that came before it.

"This was His reaction, and His lesson to us... The Tanna d'Vei Eliyahu lists attributes of HKB"H, and it includes, among them, the fact that Hashem is samei'ach b'chelko, happy with His lot (keviyachol). The Vilna Gaon asked his talmidim what sort of praise this is. 'What does it mean - that the One Who created and owns all of creation is satisfied with His lot?' The Gaon answered as follows: 'It means that HKB"H rejoices with His cheilek, His nation that is His portion, and derives the very same pleasure from the avodah of simple people as He did from the tzadikim of generations past. He will bring Moshiach to a generation serving Him in their way, fighting their challenges, trying to find Him in such a blanket of darkness; He will rejoice in their hard work just as He did with the Torah of the great ones who came before.'

"Hashem has an ayin tovah, a good eye (keviyachol), seeing what we have done right and He accepts it and loves us for it. For three long, hot days, the people walked without water and did not complain, and so, they are *בְּנֵי*,

My children, beloved and dear” (ibid, p.120-121).

The pasuk tells us: “מִי הָאִישׁ הַחֹפֵץ חַיִּים אֲהֵב יָמִים לְרָאוֹת” - *Who is the man who desires life, who loves days? The one who sees good*” (Ps.34:13). If HKB”H sees the good in a nation of complainers, how much more so must we strive to see the good and focus on the positive in each and every person, and each and every situation, around us. For as Chazal teach us (Shabbos 133b and Sotah 14a) we have a halachic imperative of v’halachta b’drachav - to emulate and ‘walk’ in the ways of Hashem. Just as He is compassionate and does chessed, so too, must we.

“There was an organization that delivered food to the patients and their families in one of the Brooklyn hospitals,

Searching for Passion

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Just as our desert journey began, an old enemy reappeared, hoping to thwart our entry into the land of Israel. Esav’s family was still bristling at the injustice of Ya’akov’s usurping the title of first-born from their grandfather. Ya’akov’s descendants must be halted before they enter the land of Hashem and claim their historical legacy. Amalek, a grandson of Esav had formed a mighty warrior-nation and now, these armies ambushed the defenseless former slaves in an open desert terrain. A rag-tag collection of former slaves would be no match for the fierce Amalek warriors.

Even Hashem Himself had previously worried that exposure to violent conflict would traumatize the still fragile nation. For this reason, He navigated us on a circuitous route to Israel, rather than journeying along the Mediterranean coast, because the coastal plains were inhabited by belligerent Philistine armies. A military encounter with these well-trained armies would demoralize the untrained Jewish people.

Weeks after our flight from Egypt, without warning, Amalek brought war to the desert and, enjoying no cover and no escape route, we were left to face the full brunt of this vicious attack.

It was obvious that our victory could only be achieved through a combination of military engagement and spiritual intercession. While the armies battled in the valley below, Moshe ascended a nearby peak, and raised his hands to heaven in prayer. Glancing at Moshe’s raised hands emboldened with greater courage, and we enjoyed several

relying on the eruv to bring the food packages on Shabbos. Someone asked Rav Dovid Feinstein zt”l (1929-2020) if it was permitted to give money to the organization for that purpose. [Rav Moshe zt”l, opposed the eruv in Brooklyn, as did his son, Rav Dovid zt”l.]

“His face turned red and his voice rose a notch. ‘For chessed!?! For chessed, then avadeh, of course you can give them money!’ he said. ‘They are doing a wonderful thing in bringing food to people, and they surely have poskim they are relying on!’” (Reb Dovid, Artscroll, p.129).

Though there is much confusion in the world around us, may we always strive to see past the flaws, and focus on, embrace and love, all that is good.

victories. Gradually though, Moshe’s hands weakened, his hands lowered, dispiriting the fighters and tipping the war in favor of Amalek. Something had to be done to support Moshe’s floundering hands, else victory would slip away.

Quickly Aharon, Moshe’s brother, and a nephew named Hur joined Moshe on the mountain and braced his arms for the remainder of the battle, thereby securing Jewish victory.

Hands of Faith

The Torah refers to Moshe’s heroic hands as “hands of faith” or “hands of emunah”. Presumably this phrase is a metaphor: just as faith is enduring and sturdy, similarly Moshe’s hands, with some assistance, remained steadily pointed to heaven. This colorful and poetic phrase is just another way of portraying Moshe’s hands as rock steady and unwavering.

There is an additional connotation to the phrase “hands of faith”: Moshe’s hands elicited faith in the soldiers waging battle. Watching an elderly Moshe struggle to keep his hands aloft, inspired great faith in their leader and great faith in the success of their mission. Without faith the battle would have been lost. Moshe’s hands of faith insured confidence and courage among the soldiers and delivered a victory of faith.

A Rough Seat

The soldiers were inspired by Moshe’s struggle to keep his hands raised, but also by his posture and positioning during their battle. Typically, during ancient warfare, monarchs remained carefully protected in the rear flank

of the camp, enjoying the comforts of the royal quarters while the common soldiers faced the harsh conditions of war. Monarchs were not expected to endure the filthy and bloody conditions of ancient battle.

Moshe was different, and though he was unable to participate in the actual battles, he stood on a nearby plateau, supervising the battle and praying for the soldiers below. More importantly, he didn't accept any luxuries or comforts while his nation below was locked in a life and death struggle. Instead of sitting upon a throne or a chair, this aged man sat on an uncomfortable boulder refusing to indulge in any pleasure while he subjected others to struggle. Moshe's passion and sacrifice inspired the soldiers to greater bravery and selflessness.

Sacrifice Inspires

Witnessing personal sacrifice in others inspires us to greater dedication. Sacrifice is generally, a result of deep passion. Passion is our ability to care about a person or an idea more than we care about ourselves and our own comforts. Caring about something more than ourselves compels us to sacrifice our own interests on behalf of others or on behalf of great ideas. Passion empowers sacrifice, and similarly, sacrifice generates greater passion, as we are forced to justify why we are surrendering our comforts. Paying a personal price for a "value" heightens the importance of that value. Passion drives sacrifice which, in turn, generates more passion.

I was deeply inspired by the passion my mentor, Rav Aharon Lichtenstein, displayed for his Torah study. His lengthy and challenging Torah lectures would regularly extend 30 minutes into our break, and we all regularly missed lunch. I realized that his passion for Torah study was more important than his hunger for food. Likewise, I recall the extra moments he spent studying Torah after completing an all-night tikkun of Torah study on Shavuot. Evidently, his passion for Torah study overcame his need for sleep. These sacrifices for Torah study, taught me the value of passion and sacrifice. People are looking to be inspired by people of passion and of sacrifice.

Good Times, Weak People

Unfortunately, there is a shortage of passion in our modern world. Life has become easy, and men have grown soft. There is a common expression: hard times produce strong people, strong people produce good times, good times produce weak people, and weak people produce hard times.

Living through good times, we are rarely asked to

sacrifice, and we rarely achieve passion. Previous generations fought great wars, endured economic crisis, or struggled on behalf of large ideas, often at great personal costs to their liberty or comfort. Their lives were harder, but their values and passion were each more sharply defined. Their sacrifices inspired us and enhanced the caliber of our own lives, filling them with content and meaning.

The modern world is too padded for passion and sacrifice. We face our own modern set of challenges and struggles, but they tend to be interpersonal and psychological, and they don't often demand relinquishing of comfort. If anything, we often solve our problems by increasing comfort, thereby decreasing sacrifice, and further diminishing passion. Without passion, life is empty and uninspired and unfortunately, we occupy an uninspired world.

Religious Passion

Religion is certainly easier than ever before. Earlier periods in history were far less friendly to Jews and to religious observance. Economic and social conditions were harsh and demanded great struggle and sacrifice. Facing endless cycles of antisemitism required great faith and great personal sacrifice. Religion required investment, courage and passion.

As the modern world has become more friendly toward Judaism, religion has become easier than ever. We have achieved wealth, political security and social influence, and can practice our religion freely, while still enjoying a reasonably comfortable lifestyle. Life in the state of Israel is triumphant and has become increasingly more comfortable.

Children look for passion in the lives of their parents and when they struggle to identify it, they remain uninspired. If the next generation does not detect any sacrifice for religion, they will assume, perhaps correctly, that we aren't passionate about religion. If we aren't passionate, why should they adopt life choices we made based on comfort and convenience. They can pursue their own independent lifestyles of comfort and ease. Without our own passion and sacrifice we have little to demand from the future.

Don't fear hardships or sacrifice, they will lead us to nobility and passion.

When the Path Before Us Isn't Clear

Rabbi Efreim Goldberg

Benei Yisrael were saved through the miracle of קריעת ים סוף – the splitting of the sea, which allowed them to cross safely to the other side, while God brought the waters down on the Egyptians, drowning them.

We find different depictions among the commentators of the way in which this miracle unfolded. Rabbeinu Bechayei writes that the water did not split all at once. Rather, with each step forward that Benei Yisrael took, the water right in front of them split, allowing them to proceed one step further. Rabbeinu Bechayei explains on this basis the description in Tehillim (114:3), הַיָּם רָאָה וַיִּנָּס – “The sea saw and retreated.” The sea “saw,” so-to-speak, each step that Benei Yisrael took, and then responded by retreating a bit further.

To explain the reason for this gradual progression, Rabbeinu Bechayei draws an interesting comparison to the manna, of which the Torah tells later in this parsha. Each person received just a single portion of manna each day. Rather than provide Benei Yisrael with a year's worth, a month's worth, or even a week's worth of food at a time, God gave them manna in daily rations, such that Benei Yisrael went to sleep each night with absolutely no food in their cabinets. They could not go to Costco to stock up; they received only a single day's ration. This system served to develop their trust and faith in Hashem, as they had no choice but to look to Him as their source of sustenance each and every day. By the same token, Rabbeinu Bechayei

writes, Benei Yisrael walked through the sea with the waters raging in front of them. With every step, they were performing a profound act of emuna, placing their fate in Hashem's hand and trusting in His deliverance, thus engendering within themselves a strong foundation of faith.

The Sifsei Kohen disagrees, claiming that Hashem would not have done this to Benei Yisrael – having them fear throughout the process of crossing the sea that they would drown. Rather, the Sifsei Kohen writes, the entire sea split all at once, such that Benei Yisrael had a clear path in front of them.

It occurred to me that these two perspectives may reflect two different realities that we sometimes face over the course of our lives. Sometimes, Hashem sets a clear path before us. For example, some people's careers follow a smooth, straight trajectory, as they build and advance without much difficulty. But at other times, the path before us is far from clear. We cannot see how we will reach our destination, how the problem will be solved, how the money will be raised, how the health condition will be cured, and so on. In such situations, Rabbeinu Bechayei's depiction teaches, we need to focus on taking the small steps that are necessary right now. Even if we cannot see the end, we need to continue moving forward, one step at a time, trusting in Hashem to bring us to the destination that we so desperately want to reach.

Secrets of the Song

Rabbi Steven Gotlib

Picture this: The Jewish people have just gotten out of Egypt. On one side of them is the Sea of Reeds while on the other side are the Egyptians, deadset on returning the Jews to their slavery. Caught between a rock and a hard place, it seems as if all hope is lost. But then Moshe Rabbeinu raises his staff and the sea splits before them, allowing them to cross on dry land. In this miraculous situation, the Jewish people are brought to sing and dance, led by Moshe and Miriam.

Observing the journey of the Jewish people thus far from a birdseye view is quite cinematic. Were our history a musical, this would certainly be the most climactic song.

And within that song lies a deep look at what it means to be a Jew not only in the Ancient Near East, but in the here and now as well. This can be made apparent by a close reading of the beginning and end of the song respectively.

The first verse of the song (Shemot 15:1, adapted JPS tr.) reads that “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to Hashem. They said: I will sing to Hashem, for He has triumphed gloriously; horse and driver He has hurled into the sea.” Rashi there comments, based on the Mechilta d'Rabbi Yishmael, that the horse and rider are significant because “both of them attached one to the other; and the waters lifted them up and then they descended into

the depths and yet they did not become separated.” In other words, the horse and rider were linked to each other throughout the event.

This may seem like a passing detail, but when Miriam is later shown singing the song for the women (15:21) it is only this opening verse that is emphasized for a second time. Rabbi Aryeh Lebowitz suggests that this line is emphasized because it encompasses the message of the entire song. The horses could be understood as the physical wealth in our lives: if utilized correctly, wealth can lead us to greater service of Hashem. But if we misuse it, then it will pull us down with it into the depths of physicality and darkness.

How can we avoid such a tremendous pitfall? The final verse of the song (Shemot 15:18) reads that “G-d will reign for all eternity.” Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch comments that this teaches that “Moses and Israel see themselves as the servants and instruments of G-d’s

great future of salvation, for which He has now laid the foundations by revealing to the world His unique mighty reign of justice and lovingkindness...” a future in which, Rav Hirsch notes, G-d will rule over not only the Jewish people, but all of humanity.

This comment itself hearkens back to an earlier one made by Rav Hirsch (Shemot 14:31) where he notes that “the eternal significance of the moment of redemption, unique in its greatness” is in demonstrating “His justice; which is to be feared at all times; His lovingkindness, which is to be trustingly awaited at all times; and His almighty power, commanding freely over all things, in which He can practice lovingkindness and justice simultaneously.”

It is our job to recognize that serving Hashem is our ultimate goal and to utilize our unique tools (both physical and spiritual) towards that end. This Song emphasizes that message literally from beginning to end.

The Malbim Teaches the Lessons of the Manna

Rabbi Ephraim Z. Buchwald

In this coming week’s parasha, parashat B’shalach, the recently freed Israelite slaves experience the fullness of G-d’s glory as they behold the splitting of the walls of water at the Sea of Reeds, and the people march through safely on dry land. An unrepentant Pharaoh, together with his chariots and his soldiers, are drowned in the sea. The Israelites, led by Moses and Miriam, sing Az Yashir, the great song of salvation, praising G-d for His miracles. Hence, the name for this Shabbat, Shabbat Shirah—the Sabbath of Song.

Despite the miraculous rescue that the Israelites experience, the people soon test G-d. The Talmud, in Arachin 15a/b, lists ten trials that the people tested the Al-mighty after the exodus. The first test occurred at Marah (Exodus 15:22-27), when the people complained that the waters there were bitter. Through miraculous intervention, Moses sweetens the water.

Not long after, the people journey to Elim. There, the entire assembly of the children of Israel once again complain to Moses and Aaron. They lament (Exodus 16:3): *מִי יִתֵּן מוֹתֵנוּ בְּיַד הַשֵּׁם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם: “If only we had died by the hand of G-d in the land of Egypt, as we sat by the pots of meat, and ate bread to satisfaction. Why did you take us out to this wilderness to kill this entire congregation by famine?”*

The Al-mighty responds to Moses, saying (Exodus 16:4): *הֲגַנִּי מִמַּטֵּיר לָכֶם לֶחֶם מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם: “Behold I shall rain down for you bread from heaven. Let the people go out and collect each day’s portion on its day, so that I can test them to see whether they will follow my teachings or not.”*

Soon after, a layer of dew descends to earth, and, behold, upon the surface of the wilderness was something thin, exposed, thin as frost. The children of Israel saw it, and said to one another (Exodus 16:15): *מָן הוּא: “What is it?”* Moses tells them that it is the food (manna) that G-d has given them to eat. He then commands the people to gather an עֹמֶר—omer, a portion of manna, to serve to each member of their household. When the people gather the manna, they discover that no matter how much or little they had collected, they had exactly an omer for each person. Moses warned the people not to leave any manna overnight until morning. But, of course, the people did not obey, and the leftover manna became infested with worms and rotted.

On the sixth day of the week (Friday), Moses told the people that since tomorrow is a day of rest (Shabbat), they should gather a double portion, and keep it until the next morning. Miraculously, the manna did not rot. As expected, the Torah reports (Exodus 16:27), that on the seventh day (Shabbat), some people still went out to the

fields expecting to gather manna, but could find none of the heavenly bread.

One of the most fascinating commentator son scriptures of the past two centuries, is the Malbim. Recognized for his brilliance while yet a child, the Malbim nevertheless lived a very difficult life. Because of the modern style of his writings, he was looked upon with suspicion by the Chassidim. The anti-religious, Maskilim, originally mistook him to be one of their own. But they soon learned to fear the power of his tongue and pen, and used every available opportunity to persecute him.

Students of Torah generally rely on the classical bible commentaries for the basic interpretations. Rashi, the Ramban, and the Ibn Ezra, all provide penetrating analyses of the text, and a fundamental elucidation of the religious, legal and philosophical issues presented by the scriptural verses. Later commentators, all rely on these earlier classical commentators for their own interpretations.

There is a perceptual difference between the early commentators and the later commentators. However, when studying the commentaries of the Malbim, it is easy to conclude mistakenly, that the Malbim belonged to the earlier school, despite the fact that he lived many hundreds of years later. His insights are so penetrating, his textual instincts so sharp, and his linguistic analysis so exceptionally brilliant, that Bible students often assume that his are the words of a ראשון—Rishon—an early (medieval) commentator, rather than an אחרון—Acharon—a latter-day commentator.

In his commentary on the Torah, the Malbim presents seven “lessons” to learn from the manna.

1. The key to all individual or communal economic well-being is entirely in the hands of G-d.
2. “Bread” is of heavenly origin, not of earthly origin. The essential human nutrients are spiritual. Contrary to popular belief, humans do not subsist on physical bread, but upon that which comes out of the mouth of G-d.
3. Humans are not to be obsessed with the desire to amass wealth, for He who gives life, gives sustenance. While every person needs to make the effort to earn a living in order to put bread on the table, sustenance is designated from Heaven for everyone. He who makes the effort will ultimately find the reward.
4. A person who has what to eat today and says, “What shall I eat tomorrow?” is a person of little faith. G-d

tests every person, and makes certain that those who follow the Torah’s dictates will receive their proper sustenance.

5. We learn from the manna that all things “holy” need preparation.
6. Every person’s economic status is predetermined in Heaven, except for the expenditures for Shabbat that are limitless.
7. By honoring the Sabbath, the other six days will be sustained properly.

It’s interesting to note that the Malbim expresses such profound faith in G-d’s sustenance, despite the fact that he himself endured great hardships in his own personal life. His early marriage to a wealthy man’s daughter ended in divorce. After remarrying, he was appointed to the prestigious position of Chief Rabbi of Bucharest, but was slandered by his enemies and accused of being a foreign agent. He was soon sentenced to death by court martial, and was saved only by the intervention of Sir Moses Montefiore. The Malbim, however, was eventually banished from Romania.

After the Bucharest affair, the Malbim had a few years of respite when his wealthy father-in-law passed away leaving him a substantial estate in Luntshitz (Russia/Poland). Unfortunately, the Jew his family hired to help manage the estate turned out to be an unscrupulous swindler and the Malbim and his family were left penniless.

Forced to return to the rabbinate, this time in the White Russian city of Mohilov, the Malbim once again was persecuted by his enemies. Again, as a result of slander, he was forced to leave Russia in 48 hours.

And yet, the legacy of the Malbim endures. Not only endures, but prevails even today, particularly among Bible students and scholars. His commentaries shine brightly, luminescent in their extraordinary brilliance.

Perhaps, there is no greater lesson that can be learned from the manna than the lesson that we learn from the life of the Malbim, who truly believed, and lived with the belief, that all sustenance is a gift from the Al-mighty.