



The Marcos and Adina Katz YUTORAH IN PRINT

Shemos 5781

The Rod of God and the Crutch of Man

Rabbi Dr. Norman Lamm z"l (Originally delivered January 19, 1963)

After Moses is persuaded by the Almighty to undertake the historic mission of leading the Children of Israel out of Egypt, he is commanded *v'et ha-mateh ha-zeh tikah be'yadekha asher taaseh bo et ha-otot*, "and thou shalt take in thy hand this rod wherewith thou shalt do the miracles." Moses then proceeds to take leave of his father-in-law and leave Midian for the perilous and fateful journey to Egypt. In obedience to the divine command, we read, *va-yikah Mosheh et mateh ha-Elohim be'yado*, "and Moses took the rod of God in his hand." At that moment, G-d turns to Moses and says, when you go back to Egypt, see that you do before Pharaoh all the miracles *asher samti be'yadekha*, "which I have put in thy hand."

Why, asks Abarbanel, the famed Spanish-Jewish commentator, does God not mention the rod, the *mateh*, as the agent with which the miracles are to be effected? Had he not commanded Moses to take the rod with him? It seems as if God is purposely avoiding mention of the rod. Why so?

Abarbanel himself provides an answer which is, in its psychological insight, of timeless significance. Moses, he tells us, had a natural fear of returning to Egypt. He was regarded by Pharaoh as a wanted man, a traitor and public enemy. His fellow Israelites thought none too kindly of him. His father-in-law Jethro no doubt reminded him of the fact that so far, every time he visited Egypt he jeopardized his life and that of his family. So that Moses was delighted when God commanded him to take along the *mateh Elohim*, the rod of God. This rod became for him the assurance of his own safety, the guarantee of his security, as he embarked on this highly dangerous enterprise. And so Moses took along the rod, and held it tight in his hand, feeling with every fibre of his being that herein lay the safety of himself, his family, and his mission. At that moment God intervened. Moses, he told him, the rod is only a tool, an implement.

In itself it is of no special value. *Re'eh kol ha-moftim asher samti be'yadekha*, behold all the wonders which I have placed in thy hand ---that is where the capacity for greatness and the safety of the mission and the reins of destiny lie: *be'yadekha* ---in your hand. Moses, do not allow the rod of God to become a crutch for man ! The *mateh* is a divine instrument; it is I who asked that it be taken along. But the moment a man places his faith in a *mateh*, he denies faith in himself and weakens his faith in Me. When the rod becomes a crutch for man, it interrupts the dialogue of faith between God and man. Therefore, take the rod, but remember that its function is to serve as a link between the two of us: by grasping it, your hand is grasping Mine. For the moment you begin to rely on the rod as such, the moment you transform it into a crutch, you have broken contact between us.

Abarbanel's interpretation of this dialogue between God and Moses is meaningful for all men at all times. For all religious institutions can sometimes be mistakenly used as psychological crutches rather than as means for the confrontation between man and his Maker; as something to lean upon rather than something to make us worthy of being leaned upon. The young man or woman who hangs a mezuzah around his neck as a kind of protective charm is converting a rod of God to a rather harmless but silly superstition--a crutch of man. The man or woman who rushes into the synagogue just in time to "catch" a Kaddish or Yizkor, and then beats a hasty retreat before the end of the rest of the service--is placing his faith in a flimsy crutch which, in context of a full religious life, is truly a *mateh Elohim*. The "national Jews" who substitute Zionism for all the rest of Torah, have taken what in perspective is a lofty and divine rod--and made of it a mere crutch, so that when the State of Israel came into being they were left, spiritually, like cripples whose crutches suddenly crumbled under

them. There is hardly a more pathetic phenomenon than the secular Zionist whose spiritual life is frustrated by premature fulfillment. Had this nationalism been part of a whole Torah outlook, had it been a genuine *mateh Elohim*, these same secular Jewish nationalists would not be today cast in the position of individuals and organizations “all dressed up and no place to go.”

And what is true of these people is equally true of those Jews whose Jewishness expresses itself only in a passion for civil liberties or only in organized philanthropy. Such ideas and institutions as human freedom and *tzedakah* are certainly noble parts of the Torah tradition and life---but when they are separated from the rest of our heritage; when they become excuses for avoiding a direct approach to God; when they are transformed in the mind and heart into crutches; when *tzedakah* becomes a kind of “instant Judaism” and loyalty to the First Amendment replaces obedience to the First Commandment---then only frustration, unhappiness, and spiritual misery can result.

In the laws of Prayer, the Shulchan Arukh teaches that during the recitation of the Amidah, it is improper to lean upon the amud --table or stand--or upon one’s neighbor. In our relations with God, we must approach Him directly. We must stand on our own two feet and take our spiritual destinies *be’yadekha*, into our own hands. We must not rely upon the cantor or the Rabbi or anyone else to pray on our behalf. Before God, it is every man for himself. To seek out a rabbi or scholar as a teacher of Torah, that is using a rod of God. But to look to him, as American Jews often do, as someone to lean upon and thus avoid your own intimate, personal religious responsibilities, as a vicarious observer of your religious obligations--that is using a crutch of man. We must rely upon God, not His rod; upon the Creator, not His creatures.

Part of our problem in modern Judaism is that we are always looking for a *mateh Elohim*, when the secret to our success or failure lies only *be’yadekha*. We spend our time in search of magic wands, when there is magic in our hands if they be but wedded to full hearts and open minds and clear eyes. We are Americans, and thus always in a rush, looking for shortcuts, and with a naive faith in gimmicks. So the rod of God seems ideally suited to our purposes---and later we discover it’s only a weak crutch.

I hope I shall not be misunderstood when I say that even a Day School education for our children can become this kind of false support, a disappointing crutch. There

is no doubt that without it Judaism cannot survive in the modern world. We Orthodox Jews pioneered this form of Jewish education. Other, non-Orthodox, Jews have begun to imitate us. Now even confirmed secular Jews are proclaiming the necessity for Day School education lest we all disappear in easy, smooth assimilation. No more wonderful *mateh Elohim* is available to us. But like the rod that God extended to Moses, there is the danger of over-reliance upon a tool and avoidance of real issues and real responsibility. All too often, parents think that by sending a child to such a school, they have automatically guaranteed the child’s Jewish future. I send my son or daughter to a good Hebrew Day School--does that not absolve me of any responsibility to teach that child personally? More than that: does not relieve me of the necessity for introducing the teachings of the school into my home? Am I not free, therefore, from teaching by personal example?

That attitude, friends, is no longer a *mateh* --it is a substitute for education! All the courses in the world cannot make up for the normal course of home example. All the texts in existence are as nothing compared with the context of proper family atmosphere. No explanation of Judaism is as good as the experience of Jewish living.

So it is with our Day Schools, so it is with all Jewish education. If we rely upon them as magical substitutes for Jewish living, they are mere crutches. If we grasp hold of them *be’yadekha* and supplement them with enthusiastic, intensive, authentic Torah living, they become a marvelous, wondrous, miraculous rod of God.

The theme of our talk--that the various institutions of Judaism, the mitzvot, the many different components of Jewish life, must not displace the fullness of Jewish experience with its direct and unmediated faith in our Heavenly Father--is beautifully summarized in the last Mishnah of the tractate Sotah. There R. Pinchas b. Yair is quoted as saying *mi-she’harev bet ha-mikdash*, when the Temple was destroyed, *bashu haverim u-vnei horin, ve-hafu rosham ve’nidaldelu anshei maseh*, that scholars and those of aristocratic descent were shamed, their prestige sunk low, and people of noble action became fewer and weaker. He concludes, *al mi lanu le’hisha’en, al Avinua she’ba-shamayim*: upon whom then can we rely? Only upon our Father in Heaven.

Is this plaintive protest out of weakness, as if, after all else has failed us, only God remains? It is not that at all. Rather, it is a courageous analysis of a national tragedy and

an optimistic discovery of sources of national strength. What R. Pinchas wants to show us is that all religious institutions are sacred--but they are merely, as with Moses, the rod of God, not the ultimate objects of reliance and faith. There were those who, in the days of the Temple, relied upon it exclusively--to the point where they escaped ultimate confrontation with the Almighty in their heart of hearts. If there is a Holy Temple, is there a need for holiness in home, office, and market-place? There were those who thought: we have scholars and thinkers, we have *gedolim* and *meyuhasim*; that absolves us of studying Torah and developing aristocracy of character. There were those who said: we have *anshei maaseh*, people of great action, outstanding philanthropists, dynamic community leaders. We may not leave it to them to worry and prepare for the perpetuation of Judaism and the Jewish people. What they did was to commit a spiritual crime: the transformation of an authentic rod of God into an artificial crutch for man. And so the Lord taught us a lesson. He removed the

crutches. The Temple was destroyed. The Scholars and aristocrats were exiled and banished. The leaders and men of action were scattered and lost. And now what shall we do, now that our crutches have been cruelly kicked out from under us? The answer, says R. Pinchas, is to walk by yourself to the most heroic and fateful encounter possible for a human being: that of standing face to face with the Creator of Heaven and Earth---and leaning, relying, and having faith in Him and Him alone. *Al mi lanu le'hisha'en, al Avinu she'ba-shamayim*. On whom shall we lean?--not on rods, not on crutches, not on anything or anyone else, but: our Father in Heaven!

Re'eh kol ha-moftim asher samti be'yadekha. With that direct faith we shall behold the miracle God has placed in our very hands: the ability to transform our lives from the drab to the exciting, from the senseless to the significant, from the profane to the sacred, from fear to confidence, from despair to ever-growing promise and hope.

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The Eternal Model of Leadership

Rabbi Josh Blass

I wrote this before the events on Wednesday in the Capitol. I fully believed the words that I wrote on Tuesday and even more so in light of recent events.

One of the predominant themes of 2020 both in the U.S and in Eretz Yisroel was the question of leadership. Who is most fit to lead? What are the characteristics that we seek in choosing a leader? Which factors should be prioritized, and which are secondary and not given full heed? While what has been front and center in our consciousness are the elections for President and Prime Minister, leadership is in fact needed in every institution, community, and family. The question is one of all importance. What qualities mark a person - President, spiritual leader, boss, or parent - as someone who is best suited to lead?

More ink has been spent on this topic than one can shake a proverbial stick at, but for us one needs to look no further than the handful of pesukim that describe the ascension of Moshe Rabbeinu to the role of the unquestioned leader of the Jewish people both in his epoch and in any epoch since. We know so little about his early life so the few 'crumbs' that we are provided with are seized upon with great relish.

Let us mention a few well known sources that paint the

picture. The first time we have any exposure to the grown Moshe, the Torah records that:

וַיְהִי בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיִּגְדַּל מֹשֶׁה וַיֵּצֵא אֶל אָחָיו וַיְרֵא בְּסִבְלָתָם וַיֵּרֶא אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם מַכֵּה אִישׁ עִבְרִי מֵאֶחָיו.

Sometime after that, when Moses had grown up, he went out to his brethren and witnessed their labors. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his brethren. (Shmos 2:11)

Rashi, quoting the Medrash, highlights that the word וַיֵּרֵא is not some simple act of seeing. Rather:

וַיֵּרֵא בְּסִבְלָתָם. נָתַן עֵינָיו וְלִבּוֹ לְהִיטֵר מִצָּר עֲלֵיהֶם

And he saw their burdens — *he set his eyes and mind to share in their distress.*

This is an act described by the ba'alei Mussar as *ha'aras panim* - completely seeing and empathizing with another person.

What happens after he sees this Egyptian striking his fellow Jew?

וַיִּפֶן כֹּה וְכֹה וַיֵּרֶא כִּי אֵין אִישׁ וַיֵּרֶא אֶת הַמִּצְרַיִם וַיִּטְמְנֵהוּ בַּחֹל.

These words 'and he saw that there was no man' have been a source of debate for the last millennia. Famously Rashi said that it means that Moshe 'saw' that no Jew would ever emanate from this Mitzri in the future. The Netziv said that what it means is that Moshe saw that there

was no one to appeal to on behalf of this besieged-upon Jew. There was no one to turn to who would adjudicate the issue fairly.

The Ramban took a simpler and I believe a more resonant approach and said that:

והנה נסתכל בסבלותם ועמלם ולא יכול לסבול ולכן הרג המצרי
המכה הנלחץ:

Moshe saw their suffering and saw that there was no one else to jump into the fray. With that middah of empathy and inability to tolerate cruelty he stood up and smote the Mitzri.

As we continue along Moshe's journey this theme continues to emerge - namely Moshe's inability to watch oppression and not in some way to get involved. Whether it was his desire to break up the conflict between the two Jews in Mitzraim or in his advocacy for the daughters of Yisro in Midian, Moshe was simply unable to watch cruelty from the sidelines. This middah blends seamlessly into his chosen profession upon arriving in Midian - that of a shepherd.

The Be'er Mayim Chaim in quoting the famous Medrash says the following:

ומשה היה רועה את צאן יתרו חותנו וגו'. הודיע הכתוב מאין זכה משה להיות הוא השליח לישראל והוא אשר יוציאם ויביאם, לרעות את עם ה', והוא לאשר היה רועה נאמן בצאן חותנו ברחמים מרובים כמאמר חז"ל (שמות רבה ב', ב') שפעם אחת ברח ממנו גדי אחד ורץ אחריו וכו' נודמנה לו בריכה של מים ועמד הגדי לשתות כיון שהגיע משה אצלו אמר אני לא הייתי יודע שרץ היית מפני הצמא עיף אתה הרכיבו על כתיפו והוא מהלך אמר הקב"ה יש לך רחמים לנהוג צאנו של בשר ודם כך, חיך אתה תרעה את צאני וכו', עד כאן. הרי שמשם זכה לרעות כצאן עמו.

While the entire Medrash is beyond beautiful and paints the exact picture that allows one to understand who Moshe Rabbeinu was, the key concept is that Moshe was chosen to be the future leader of G-d's people because of the care and empathy that he demonstrated towards the gentlest and most helpless of creations. The line is worth repeating in that it describes the precise Jewish ethic that informs not just appropriate leadership but general behavior and outlook –

אמר הקב"ה יש לך רחמים לנהוג צאנו של בשר ודם כך, חיך אתה תרעה את צאני וכו', עד כאן. הרי שמשם זכה לרעות כצאן עמו.

Lastly, one reflects on the choice of a thornbush as the vehicle of revelation to Moshe Rabbeinu. This was the beginning of the grandest moment in Jewish History and it began in the most inauspicious of places. The

medrash records a number of reasons for this choice. One explanation that has always caught my eye was in the Mechilta:

ד"א למה מתוך הסנה ר' אלעזר בן ערך אומר מפני מה נגלה הקב"ה משממי מרום והיה מדבר עם משה מתוך הסנה לפי שיכול המקום שידבר מראש הרים ומראש הגבעות מגבהי עולם ומארזי לבנון אלא השפיל עצמו ודבר מתוך הסנה ועליו אמר שלמה (משלי כ"ט כ"ג) ושפל רוח יתמוך כבוד: אי אתה מוצא מן האילנות שפל מן הסנה וכן הוא אומר (תהלים קל"ח ו') כי רם ד' ושפל יראה.

HKB'H could have spoken from anywhere and from any vehicle. The choice of the thornbush was a way of communicating the necessity of humility in whoever is chosen to lead the people. This is a theme that will be revisited throughout the Torah - Moshe's humility as a prerequisite for leadership.

While there is no shortage of other themes that are required in a leader and that Moshe himself demonstrated - integrity, strength of character, unafraid to make unpopular decisions, honesty etc. the initial point of emphasis is empathy and humility, kindness and ego-restraint.

Why are these the middos most emphasized in Moshe Rabbeinu and in arguably all future Jewish leaders? On a simple level the answer is obvious. A leader who is not empathetic and who is led by his own ego-driven needs eventually uses his power to serve his own ends and for his own self-aggrandizement. But it is really more than that. Effective leadership is when there is complete identification between a leader and his people. An entity be it a family or a country is an organism in which the leader plays a primary role but is at the same time completely integrated into that whole. There is a love and an identification felt by the leader for his people which is in turn reciprocated by the people's feelings for the leader. That can only happen with empathy, with respect for the entire populace and with a genuine spirit of humility. Most importantly, the leaders who cultivate that spirit and that identification truly elevate the national character.

Clearly Moshe Rabbeinu understood and cultivated this unique, empathetic, and respectful relationship between the leader and the עם. The Ramban (Bamidbar 16:1) points out that Korach's rebellion could have only taken place after the sin of the spies once the national mood had been dampened, because prior to that the nation loved Moshe in the way that a child loves a mother and could not have fathomed rebelling against him. Furthermore, the Ramban (Bamidbar 1:1) notes that one of the purposes

of doing a census was so that Moshe Rabbeinu could personally interact with every member of Am Yisroel.

At some point seemingly the feeling of complete identification between Moshe and the nation became threatened. The Rambam (in Hilchos Dei'os and in Shemoneh Perakim) claims that Moshe's sin at mei merivah was that he angrily rebuked the people - שמעו נא - המורים - listen to me you rebellious ones. When it became clear that even Moshe had reached his limit and that his ability to empathetically elevate the nation had perhaps run its course then HKB'H decided that a change in leadership was necessary.

A particularly profound line in Berachos 28a always struck me as underscoring this dynamic between a leader and his/her subjects. The gemarah records how the Nasi Rabban Gamliel had entered into a public dispute with R' Yehoshua and how Rabban Gamliel had embarrassed his talmudic adversary. When Rabban Gamliel, who came from wealthy nobility, entered into Rebbe Yehoshua's somewhat dilapidated home to ask him for forgiveness, Rabban Gamliel made a comment that indicated that he wasn't really aware of the type of life choices that someone of Rebbe Yehoshua's economic status was forced to make. Rebbe Yehoshua responds sharply that

אוי לו לדור שאָתָה פֿרָנסוּ, שאַי אָתָה יוֹדעַ בְּצַעֲרֵן שֶׁל תְּלַמִּידֵי חֲכָמִים, בְּמָה הֵם מִתְּפַרְנְסִים וּבְמָה הֵם נֹזְזִים.

Essentially saying that woe onto this generation that you have been entrusted to lead for you have no true understanding of the struggles of the people.

Rav Kook on that gemara expresses the following beautiful formulation:

הנהגת הדור הראויה צריכה להיות שהמנהיג ישתדל לחדור למצבו של כל יחיד לפי כחו. ובמה שישתדל לתקן גם כן כל המצבים הפרטיים יתרומם מצב הכלל כולו.

A leader may have many qualities but first and foremost does he love, empathize with, deeply understand, and fully respect the totality of the people who he serves? If not, then אוי לו לדור שאָתָה פֿרָנסוּ.

As the gemara forcefully notes:

תנו רבנן שלשה הקב"ה בוכה עליהן בכל יום על שאפשר לעסוק בתורה ואינו עוסק ועל שאי אפשר לעסוק בתורה ועוסק ועל פרנס המתגאה על הצבור

HKB'H cries daily when he sees a parnes (a leader) lordling

over the community (Chagigah 5b)

Even leaving aside the countless models in Tanach and from Chazal, we as Americans and as Jews have been blessed to witness many leaders who reflect what I believe to be the Torah's vision of leadership. Abraham Lincoln might be the greatest example of such a person but there have been many others. Men and women of decency and idealism who were completely connected to the nation and to the people who they served and who, because of that identification, were able to elevate the entire national consciousness. David Ben Gurion and Menachem Begun were flawed human beings but at the same time they were genuinely great men who brought out the best, most noble and most selfless spirit in their countrymen. None of these people, G-d forbid, can be compared to Moshe Rabbeinu but in their ability to identify with, be identified with, and passionately elevate the people they found similarities with the greatest of our leaders.

It is just my humble opinion but to unapologetically, unabashedly, and loudly support candidates who fly in the face of the Torah's eternal values of empathy, humility, nobility, and integrity seems like an inadvertent sidelining and disgrace of the Torah. The unintended message would seem to be that the domain of the Torah exists only in some black and white area of halakha as opposed to being a Toras Chaim that informs every piece of our lives. Very simply, if we believe in decency, derech eretz, empathy, respect, humility, kavod habrios etc. than taking public positions that fly in the face of those most essential of values seems to me to be a desecration of the HKB'H's Torah that promotes those values.

The hope is that leadership, be it in communities, shuls, schools and in the government continues to attract and inspire the best and the brightest. While great men and women such as Moshe Rabbeinu, Dvorah HaNeviah, Dovid HaMelech and Yoshiyahu HaMelech all approached leadership with a certain healthy ambivalence, eventually they heard the call to service and brought both their great strength and their great decency to bear in the service of Am Yisroel.

Let us hope that that is a model that we continue to see and support for the betterment of our people and of humankind.

The Great Potential of the Jewish People

Rabbi Assaf Bednarsh (Transcribed and adapted from a shiur given in the Gruss Kollel on December 31 2015)

One of those fascinating episodes in this week's Parsha is the "consecration" of Moshe. He sees a burning bush and goes to check it out. And Hashem talks to Moshe for the first time. Moshe becomes a shaliach of Hashem in this incident of the "sneh." Why was this significant? Why didn't a voice just ring out of Heaven? Elementary, this is a big miracle — that this bush is burning and not consumed — so that Moshe would see that it's really G-d because there is a miracle happening against the laws of nature. But still, we wonder, why this particular miracle? Hashem could have thought of a "gazillion" miracles! So why particularly this?

Rashi suggests that it a remez to Moshe about himself. You could be very afraid to go to Pharaoh and demand. It could end up with "Off with his head!" Therefore, in this way, Hashem conveys to him that the "sneh" is my shaliach. And even though it's ablaze nevertheless, it's still saved and is not being hurt. And the same way, when you go to Pharaoh, and he will tell the guards to kill you, etc., etc.,— like what happened earlier in the story according to the Medrash—you will not be hurt.

The Rav darshened this episode with the "sneh" in a different way. He said that the burning bush does not symbolize Moshe. On the contrary, it's a symbol for Am Yisroel. The pasuk says: "labas eish b'toch hasne." When you just look at the sneh from the outside, it seems like an ordinary bush — nothing special. But on the inside, it has remarkable, miraculous power. Hashem is "b'toch hasne." On the one hand, it's just a bush. An ordinary shrub is nothing special; it's not even a tree that gives a fruit or something usable, etc. It's an "ilan srak" — a useless tree. On the other hand, however, there's a divine power inside. There's a holy fire and Hashem's voice coming from within. There is a hidden secret of ruchnius.

The Rav asked, "What was Moshe's challenge here?" It wasn't that Pharaoh would kill him. Moshe was a very holy person. And he was a very "frum" person. And he would be "moser nefesh" for Hashem. That wasn't his biggest problem. The biggest problem that leaders sometimes face is frustration. His frustration here, "has veshalom," would not be with Hashem. It would rather be his frustration with the people. The leader has to lead people. And what happened in the case of Moshe? He was already trying to

help the Jews before Hashem told him anything. The pasuk says: "...vayigdal Moshe vayeitzei el echav va'yar b'sivlosam." When he became a gadol and went out into the world, the first thing Moshe wanted to do was to help his fellow Jews. And what happened? It backfired. And the Jews themselves told on him, criticized him, and refused to listen to him. First, he tried to save one Jew. Then, he tried saving a Jew from being hit by another Jew and taught them not to fight. But what did they do? They just criticized him and told on him, and they slandered him to Pharaoh. And in so doing so, they disappointed him. And that's what Rashi quotes from the Medrash — "I don't think they should be redeemed. They don't have zechuyos." He lost his faith in the Jewish people because their behavior was so bad. You can see that here. Moshe says: "But they won't believe me. Moshe's problem was that he didn't have faith in the Jewish People. So the Rav said: "What's Hashem telling Moshe? Hashem is telling Moshe: "No. No. No." The Jewish people might be a sneh. It looks like a useless tree in the desert, "garbage," etc. But inside, in the heart of the Jewish People, there is a labas eish. There is a holy fire! — not a regular fire. There is a fire min hashomayim! There's the presence of Hashem! There is the Shechina inside! Inside the Jewish people—if you only look a little deeper, you will see that they will believe you. Moshe kept saying: "They won't believe me." And Hashem said: "...v'shamu l'kolecha.", they will listen to you; "...v'he'eminu.", they will believe you. That's what Hashem was telling Moshe: It is not enough to believe in Hashem. It's not enough to have faith in yourself. To be a leader, you must have faith in the people and to see it in them. Don't be naive, though. Obviously, there will be challenges. However, the challenges are on the outside. On the inside, b'lev, b'labas eish, there is a holy fire of Hashem. And that is the real source of the kedusha of every Jew. Once Moshe learned that - he was a leader in the making!

I want to point out that historically the Rav was not the only gadol who came to America at the beginning of the twentieth century. Many Rabbis moved to America in that era. A lot of them were Gedolei Olam, steeped in Talmud Torah, Yiras Shomayim, and Prishus, the likes of which we have never heard of in our lives! And they became rabbis in Trenton and someplace in Wyoming, or Minnesota, or wherever it is... And they never accomplished anything

in America because they said: “The American Jews... We can’t save them. Forget it! The American Jews are hopeless. We will never make them frum in America.” However, the uniqueness of the Rav (and a few other famous people whose names you probably heard) was that he came to America and said: “Whatever we did in Brisk, we can do in America as well. I know that the American Jews look

shallow and assimilated, but you only have to teach them properly. You have to explain to them *al pi lamdus* and *amkus* what the Torah really means, and they can truly rise to the highest heights. And you see from the *talmidim* and the “*talmidim of the talmidim*” of the Rav that.. it worked!

And that’s what you need to become a true Jewish leader.

Symbolic Staff and Serpent

Mrs. Shira Smiles (Adapted by Channie Koplowitz Stein)

With Parshat Shemot we begin the saga of Bnei Yisroel’s actual enslavement and the seeds being sown for their redemption. The new Pharaoh has issued multiple decrees oppressing Bnei Yisroel while the chosen redeemer, Moshe, has been born, has grown to adulthood, has proven his worthiness for the role Hashem has chosen for him, and has already received God’s communication to tell Bnei Yisroel that Hashem has remembered them and is about to redeem them.

But Moshe is extremely skeptical. “They will not believe me...,” responds Moshe, whereupon Hashem asks him, “*Mazeh beyodecha/What is that in your hand?*” “It is a *mateh/staff*,” replies Moshe. With that cue, Hashem has Moshe perform signs that, when Moshe will replay them before Bnei Yisroel, they will be convinced that Hashem had actually sent Moshe to redeem them.

Our first question revolves around Moshe’s skepticism. Why does he feel Bnei Yisroel will not believe him? Chazal point out that that this lack of faith in Bnei Yisroel was a failing on Moshe’s part, and Hashem’s pointing to the stick is an indication that Hashem felt Moshe should be punished and struck with the stick for his impugning the faith of Bnei Yisroel. The later sign of *tzoraas/leprosy* is a further punishment for Moshe’s *loshon horo* of Bnei Yisroel.

Rabbi Zaks in *Menachem Zion* sees completely different symbolism in the staff in Moshe’s hand. Moshe felt that Bnei Yisroel was so connected to *Mitzrayim*, to the outer trappings of *galus*, that they would not be able to accept the freedom that Torah offered. But Hashem is telling Moshe that Bnei Yisroel internally are all believers. Your job, Moshe, is to hold onto the stick, because if you don’t believe in Bnei Yisroel and you throw them away, they will indeed turn into Egyptian snakes. Moshe, pick them up, believe in them, and they will again become the strong staff

in your hand.

That staff, continues Rabbi Zaks, may also represent the staff of the wandering Jew in the diaspora. In Egypt, as well as in every country in subsequent diasporas, the Jew tends to rely on the government of the host country for protection. After all, he is a good citizen who contributes to the social, economic and cultural fabric of the country he is in. But it does not take much for that reliable support to transform itself into a snake set to bite and destroy the Jews in its midst. But Bnei Yisroel has a tendency to believe that conditions will improve, for this country is another Eden. Bnei Yisroel, reasoned Moshe Rabbenu, will not believe because they will not want to believe and will not want to leave. In fact, four fifths of Bnei Yisroel actually chose to remain in Egypt and not leave.

In a related interpretation, the Oshorover Rebbe sees that the staff is no more than a dry stick representing kings and emperors who suddenly turn on the Jews under their rule. As quickly as they rose in their positions of power, so will they fall to oppress the Jews and become snakes to them. On the other hand, referring to the second sign, Bnei Yisroel may appear as dead as the leprous hand, but they will be rejuvenated and reinstated. When the Jewish community in one diaspora country has died, the Jewish community gets new life in another country. The most obvious example of this phenomenon is the birth of the Jewish State with its multiple centers of learning out of the ashes of the Holocaust. We must hold on through all these persecutions, knowing that Hashem is in charge, that it is Hashem who purifies those who are impure with leprosy, and it is Hashem who raises us up again from the depths at each point of the diaspora.

This dynamic plays out cyclically throughout our history beginning with the life of Yosef himself. This exalted, favorite son is thrown into a pit and sold into slavery.

He rises to become the chief “employee” in Potiphar’s household, only to be thrown into a dungeon on trumped up charges. From the depths of the dungeon, he is again lifted up to become viceroy of all Egypt.

Rabbi Zaks then takes these ideas deeper. Hashem was not asking Moshe mah zeh/what is this in your hand, but mizeh/from this which is in your hand. Your pure hand will lead the people through the otiyos/signs/letters of the Torah. It will be Bnei Yisroel’s connection to the letters of the Torah and to Hashem that will sustain them and redeem them through every exile. How will Bnei Yisroel believe you, asks Hashem? Through your mateh, through your ability lehatot/to turn the hearts of Bnei Yisroel from the depravity of Egypt to the purity of Torah.

Part of the redemption process, writes Rabbi Scher citing the verse in Hoshea, is the teshuvah that acknowledges that we have no one on whom we may rely except on our Father in heaven, and, as the verse in Tehillim says, “Your staff and Your rod, they will be my comfort.” When we rely only on Hashem, writes Rav Bachye Ibn Pakuda in Chovot Halevavot, we free ourselves from reliance on anything in the external world and from subservience to other human beings, although we may continue using these with Hashem’s help. Bnei Yisroel were not only enslaved physically, but also by their mindset that was entrenched in the forty nine levels of Egyptian depravity.

This is what Moshe was afraid of when he stated that Bnei Yisroel will not believe him. Moshe was afraid that their minds could not conceive of a higher spiritual calling. Bnei Yisroel believed they were what others perceived them to be, no different than the Egyptians among whom they lived.

Rabbi Belsky offers the following parable to explain this point. A hunter, passing by a farmhouse, noticed an unusual bird among the chickens, pecking away at the ground for some bits of grain. When the hunter asked the farmer about this bird, the farmer said it was just another chicken, although hatched from a larger egg and eating more than the other chickens. What a sorry situation, thought the hunter, as no one had told this bird that in reality it was an eagle, meant to soar through the heavens. Just so was Bnei Yisroel, thought Moshe. Bnei Yisroel cannot imagine that they are meant to soar with angels in the spiritual environment of heaven. Moshe’s mission would be to implant this idea in their minds so that even when they forget their true identity, the spark remains alive

within them and their spirits will still have the ability to reignite and soar.

What was the catalyst for the dialogue between Hakodosh Boruch Hu and Moshe? The burning bush that refused to be consumed. This was the symbol that would carry Bnei Yisroel forward toward redemption, writes the Netivot Shalom. Although Bnei Yisroel were steeped in the fiery passions of Egyptian depravity, the bush itself would not be consumed, for the land to which it was anchored was holy, a land that required Moshe to remove his shoes.

The signs that followed reinforced this idea, continues the Netivot Shalom. Hashem asks Moshe, “What is this in your hand?” That wood could have been either a makel/stick or a mateh/staff. The difference in terminology is instructive. While a stick is generally used for destructive purposes, a staff is usually meant to be constructive. Moshe answers that it is a staff. If you drop that staff on the ground, it is no longer useful and becomes nothing more than a stick. But if you then pick it up, it again becomes something to lean on. Although Bnei Yisroel were now downtrodden in Egypt, Moshe was to lift them up again to return to their glorious destiny, to transform the snake again to an eagle.

Every Jew has that spark of Divinity within him, a spark that will never leave no matter the circumstances he is in temporarily. The snake is only temporary; the diseased hand can return to health and productivity. But the Nile, the symbol of the depravity of Egypt, will not survive.

We have seen that serpent before, reminds us the Imrei Chemed. That snake, that serpent is the primordial serpent, the source of sin, the evil inclination. When we grab it even minimally, by the tip of its tail, so that we can suppress it and do teshuvah, Hashem will help us succeed. All you need is for your heart to take a small turn toward Hashem, and Hashem will clear the path of return and, unfortunately, the reverse is also true. Take that one small step and change your mentality.

Just as Moshe picked up the snake and took control of the snakelike, physical aspect of himself, writes the Malbim, so must we too be aware of that aspect within ourselves and control it. Although we have the Torah as our guide, we must still be constantly on our guard against the alluring snakes in our environment, warns us Rabbi Belsky.

We are all influenced by our environment. Even if we ourselves do not smoke, we are polluted by second hand smoke. If we regularly attend a shul where the congregants

have conversations during lulls in davening, speaking during davening slowly becomes acceptable behavior. Our personal standards are influenced by the standards around us. [Just think of what is now accepted as a “marriage” and “family” in our society. CKS] Succumbing to the values and mores of the society around us becomes our inner galus, and we ask that Hashem help ask retain our eagle perspective and ideals, for without Hashem’s support, we are doomed to failure. Bnei Yisroel in Mitzrayim needed Hashem’s help to grab the snake by the tail, as do we.

As we know, we are not in control of our circumstances, writes the R, Michel Twerski in Yiram Hayam, but we are in control of how we respond to those circumstances. That is in our hand, and how we turn, mateh, our perspective will determine whether the circumstance remains negative

Be Like Moshe

Rabbi Moshe Taragin

Moshe was arguably the greatest man to ever live. He scaled the heavens and split the seas. He liberated a nation of slaves and taught them about a God they couldn’t visualize but whose Will they could study. For forty years he piloted a rebellious nation throughout a barren desert on their way to a golden land. How does a man like Moshe develop? Perhaps his life-particularly the chapter before he is chosen by God- can provide clues for our own religious growth.

Moshe’s birth is preceded by a seemingly ‘standard’ story about the marriage of his parents: a man from the house of Levi marries a woman from the same tribe and together they birth Moshe. We aren’t informed of the names of his parents and this anonymity emphasizes that Moshe didn’t inherit his position because of his prestigious parents- we don’t even know their names! By and large, with some exceptions, Judaism aspires to a system of meritocracy where leaders earn their position, rather than receiving it through ‘yichus’. Though the ‘real world’ doesn’t always operate in this manner, it is certainly the ideal.

Additionally, the attention paid to Moshe’s birth and his nursing as an infant, stresses the fact that the “greatest prophet” was born through natural means. His was drawn from a water-soaked cradle and raised by multiple “mothers”. This story debunks any absurdity about prophets being supernaturally born. Born through natural means and without celebrity, Moshe develops into the greatest man to ever bestride our planet.

or becomes a catalyst for growth. Rabbi Twerski presents a metaphor of a beautiful diamond that in a moment of carelessness developed a scratch that seemed to mar its beauty. However, the diamond cutter etched some roses onto the diamond, using that initial scratch as his starting point, and that diamond became even more valuable and magnificent. We have the ability to make teachable moments for ourselves and for others by pausing to observe our negative situation, grabbing it by the tail, and transforming those negatives to build positives.

We are each multi faceted beings and find ourselves in many environments. Will we take hold of the snakes in our lives, have faith, and choose to turn them into the support we can always get by relying on Hashem and His Torah? The choice is in our hands.

How does he develop into a great prophet? In our era, we no longer enjoy the experience of prophecy, but Moshe’s development certainly can inspire our own growth. The Rambam (in his philosophical sefer known as “Moreh Nevuchim”) affirms that God doesn’t indiscriminately or arbitrarily select prophets. Human beings must first refine their own moral character, develop their intellect and heighten their religious sensibility, so that they become suited for prophecy. God then chooses from among these ‘prophetically-suited’ candidates. Moshe’s “journey to prophecy” can be followed even by human beings who will never achieve actual prophecy. His road to prophecy can help us navigate our own journey to religious growth.

Before he is selected at the ‘burning bush’, Moshe displays four different traits:

1. Sympathy with Human Suffering

Moshe forays out of his comfortable palace and witnesses human suffering. Encountering an Egyptian abusing a Jewish slave, he protects the victim by neutralizing the attacker. It is not all together clear that, at this point, Moshe was even aware of his Jewish identity. None the less, he intervenes on behalf of a “person” being victimized. At a later stage, upon arriving in Midyan and attempting to escape arrest, Moshe once again intercedes- even at great personal cost; as a fugitive, it is certainly in his best interest to maintain a low profile and ignore this local quarrel. Yet he can’t help but sympathize with these non-

Jewish but defenseless girls and shields them from abusive herdsman. Moshe is chosen because he sympathizes with human suffering and rails against injustice even when not personally advantageous or politically correct.

It is fair to ask whether parts of the Jewish community have abandoned this mission. In Israel, the agenda of social justice and economic equality has been “adopted” by secular Israelis for whom an agenda of religion or one of settling the land of Israel is, unfortunately, irrelevant. Sadly, and in some ways in reaction to “secular appropriation, many religious Jews in Israel pay little interest to the ‘social agenda.’ A similar trend has evolved in the Jewish world even outside the State of Israel. Many non-Orthodox streams of Judaism have pivoted themselves upon agendas of socio-economic equality and protection of vulnerable members of society. This has caused some, in Orthodox circles, to recoil from these important programs. Moshe’s “rise” reminds us all that, at the heart of Jewish identity, lies concern and sympathy for victims of injustice. Even if we don’t channel resources toward the redressing of injustice we certainly cannot remain callous or unfeeling when victimization occurs or when humans suffer.

2. A Simple Desert-Life

Moshe begins his career by shepherding his father-in-law’s sheep thereby following the careers of our avot who, in sefer Breishit, also tended to flocks. Shepherds lead very simple rural lives devoid of the comforts and luxuries of the city. Ironically, Moshe first hears the voice of God in this barren desert and not in the more luxurious palace in which he was reared.

Our modern world has become very sophisticated, comfortable and cultured. What price do we all pay for sophistication? Do we relinquish natural purity and wholesomeness through exposure to social vanity and the aggressive pursuit of wealth and reputation? By distancing himself from palace life and palace intrigue, Moshe receives his first prophecy. Spiritual health is dependent upon striking a balance between our desire for sophistication and “progress” and the retention of common and humble innocence. We run the risk of becoming too sophisticated

and too “plastic”, unable to express or even sense authentic passion or emotion.

3. Moshe Works Hard

A shepherd lives a demanding life with grueling schedules and taxing workloads. In defending against Lavan’s false allegations, Ya’akov emphasizes that shepherds work day and night and suffer through relentless and extreme weather conditions. Hard work generally refines our character, builds selflessness, and strengthens our discipline. For these reasons both the desert mishkan, as well as the ultimate Beit Hamikdash, were crafted by human industry rather than prefabricated by God. God’s presence only descended to the human realm through intense labor and Moshe only received his prophecy after steering cattle through the desert. In a world of ‘ease’ and ‘convenience’ Moshe’s early career should remind us of the value of toil and even struggle. We have all met people about whom it could be said that it would have been beneficial had they struggled earlier in life.

4. Moshe’s Curiosity

Moshe observes an atypical phenomenon: a bush beset by fire but not devoured. Less curious people may have scuttled along, barely noticing this wonder or disinterested in exploring this anomaly. Moshe deliberately diverts to better “see into the life of things” and decipher this mystery. Realizing that something deeper lies beneath the surface, he examines the shrubbery and hears the voice of God. Perhaps Moshe also senses a celestial message latent in this fire which obviously stems from a different realm.

Intellectual curiosity –especially in today’s world- can be tricky. We enjoy such easy access to a range of toxic information and media. It is crucial that we draw “red lines in the sand” and curb our curiosity to preserve our purity. However, there is also a danger of becoming to disinterested and too shallow. If we had passed lowly burning bush would we be too busy to take notice? If we took notice would we be too lazy to explore and analyze? Would we ‘miss’ the voice of God because we don’t sufficiently dig beneath the surface of our lives?

The Bystander Effect

Rabbi Dr. Mordechai Schiffman

In 1964, Kitty Genovese was stabbed and killed in Kew Gardens, Queens. The New York Times reported that 38 witnesses saw or heard the attack, and nobody did anything to help. This article (which was later shown to be exaggerated) motivated social psychologists John M. Darley and Bibb Latané to attempt to better understand why people did not help. In a series of experiments, Darley and Latané demonstrated what they termed the bystander effect. People are less likely to help someone in distress when there are other people present. Over the years, several different explanations were presented for this phenomenon, including assuming someone else will act (diffusion of responsibility), uncertainty about if and how to act, fear of physical or social repercussions, amongst others.

In the second chapter of Sefer Shemot we are presented with Moshe's brief, yet powerful origin story. After being saved and raised by the daughter of Paroh, Moshe matures ("Vayigdal") and observes the scene of Egyptian slavery. His first reaction is to notice the pain and the plight of the Ivri slaves ("vayar be-sivlotam"). Rashi explains that he notices and empathizes with their distress. Rabbi Yochanan Luria, indicates that this wasn't just a cognitive or emotional exercise for Moshe. Rather, he was actively looking to help others and protect the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor. What follows in the narrative are three successive stories that demonstrate this core character trait of Moshe.

First, Moshe witnesses an Egyptian beating an Ivri, "turns this way and that way, sees that there is no man" and kills the Egyptian (Shemot 2:12). One way to understand Moshe's behavior is that he turned in each direction to make sure that nobody would see him so he wouldn't get caught. Yet, Rabbi Yaakov Tzvi Mecklenburg offers a completely different explanation which changes the way we understand the whole scene. He suggests the Egyptian was actually hitting the Ivri in the presence of other Ivri slaves. Moshe turns in each direction not to see if there is anybody else present, but to see if any of the other Ivrim who are present would stand up and defend his brother against the Egyptian. Moshe sees that there is no "ish," no person of substance or stature who will act in this situation.

When everyone else was a bystander, Moshe takes action and defends the Ivri.

In the second story, Moshe observes two Ivrim fighting and Moshe intervenes to stop them. The details of the fight are unclear within the pesukim and commentators offer differing views to fill in the gaps. Rabbi Isaac Arama assumes that both parties bare responsibility for the fight and argues that Moshe is demonstrating an essential leadership quality, namely, a desire and ability to step in and adjudicate conflict. In contrast, Rabbi Chaim ibn Attar suggests that this scene is one of a perpetrator and a victim, paralleling the earlier story with the Egyptian. Moshe intervenes, once again demonstrating his ability to act for the sake of the oppressed.

In the final story, Moshe approaches a well in Midyan and sees shepherds harassing a group of young girls. Moshe sees the injustice and saves the oppressed from the hands of the oppressor. What makes this third story even more compelling is that it comes on the heel of Moshe paying the direct price for intervening in the first and second stories. Moshe was not rewarded for his courageous behavior but had to run for his life because he intervened. Yet, confronted with a third injustice, he doesn't let history get in the way of doing what is right.

Rabbi Isaac Karo points out that there is a powerful progression in each of these stories. While each intervention is impressive, the first is perhaps the most understandable as Moshe is protecting one of his own from an outsider. The second story offers more justification for inaction as the perpetrator is a peer, yet he acts anyways. Finally, even in the third encounter, where both parties are strangers and Moshe could have easily just minded his own business and walk away, Moshe steps in and saves them.

With these three stories, the Torah provides us a paradigm of what it means to be an upstander instead of a bystander. There may be many psychological factors that can lead to inaction in such scenarios. Yet, despite those factors, when there are those around us in need, we are called on to emulate Moshe and intercede on their behalf.

The Man of Justice

Rabbi Dr. Dvir Ginsberg

When Moshe first enters Egyptian society, as presented in the Torah portion of Shemot, his first exploit is to strike down the Egyptian oppressor and save the Jewish slave from his torture. Moshe flees to Midian, and the scene changes to the daughters of the priest of Midian gathered by a well. The story plays out as follows (Shemot 2:16-17) :

“Now the chief of Midian had seven daughters, and they came and drew [water], and they filled the troughs to water their father’s flocks. But the shepherds came and drove them away; so Moses arose and rescued them [vayoshian] and watered their flocks.”

Moshe certainly appears magnanimous. The daughters then return home (ibid 18-19):

“They came to their father Reuel, and he said, “Why have you come so quickly today?” They replied, “An Egyptian man [ish mitzri] rescued [hitzil] us from the hand[s] of the shepherds, and he also drew [water] for us and watered the flocks.””

It is interesting to note that Moshe is not named by the daughters. He is identified as ish mitzri.

Yitro (the common understanding of their father) seems horrified (ibid 20):

“He said to his daughters, “So where is he? Why have you left the man [ish]? Invite him, and let him eat bread.””

Indeed, it seems quite troubling that Moshe was not invited. Where was the hakarat hatov, the recognition of the good and the gratitude? We also see that Yitro refers now to Moshe as ish, rather than ish mitzri. Why the change?

Moshe then joins the family for the meal (ibid 21):

“Moses consented to stay with the man, and he gave his daughter Zipporah to Moses”

The idea of Moshe “consenting” is also an odd method of describing joining the family for a meal.

As noted above, there are a number of issues that require clarification. However, there is a subtle change in language that is confusing. The daughters of Yitro refer to Moshe’s action as being saved, or hatzala. Yet the Torah describes it as salvation, or yeshua. Why the two different descriptions of saving the women?

Finally, there is a Midrash that offers a severe rebuke of Moshe. The daughters identify Moshe to their father as ish mitzri. He should have been identified as ish ivri, an

individual from the land of the Ivrim. The reference here is to the Land of Israel, where the patriarchs and matriarchs resided. Yosef, when addressing the Sar Mashkim while in prison, describes himself as being from the land of the Ivrim. For this detail, Yosef’s bones were to be buried in Israel. However, since Moshe failed to allow himself to be presented as from the land of Ivrim, he is punished by not having his bones buried in Israel.

This is an extremely harsh critique of Moshe. Not only is it severe, we know much later on in the narrative that Moshe never enters into the Land of Israel for a the incident with the rock. How do we make sense of this Midrash?

The key to understanding this episode lies in the different views of Moshe’s actions. When Moshe enters the scene in Midian, it is clear the women were being harassed. In such a situation, it is normal to first identify with the suffering of those being oppressed. The catalyst for assisting then emerges from a simple equation: if the observer were in the role of being oppressed, being rescued would be exactly what the person would desire. Who would not want to be helped in such a situation? Thus, through identifying with the person’s suffering, the desire to help emerges.

One should not think that aiding someone through such a causal chain is problematic. Empathy is a powerful driving force, and ultimately is of great value in charitable actions and results. However, there is another potential catalyst when viewing those who are oppressed and in need of aid. When an injustice occurs, the very presence of such a perversion of principles becomes that which drives the individual to act. The observer sees a distortion, now moved to act; identifying with the person’s suffering is not part of the process. Such an individual does not necessarily lack empathy; rather, the person is purely motivated by the tenets of justice alone.

The episode with Yitro’s daughters brings to light these two viewpoints and the uniqueness of Moshe. In their view, Moshe identified with their plight, and acted accordingly. He saved them, and act of hatzala, the empathetic approach to assistance. The Torah, though, describes Moshe’s action as that of yeshua, an act of salvation. The idea of salvation is normally linked to Divine action. R Yehuda HaLevi, in the Kuzari, notes that while

humans identify with suffering and then act, God acts like a judge. The Divine response reflects pure justice. Moshe possessed this view, seeing the plight of the oppressed as a problem in and of itself. His actions were then guided by a desire to right the wrong.

We can now understand a bit more about the confusion with Yitro in the behavior of his daughters. It is possible there was never a formal introduction between Moshe and the daughters. Moshe sought no personal attachment to his actions, no potential ego gratification. It was unimportant who he was, and he sought to keep it that way. Being invited over and offered praise and gratitude was something he had no interest in, as it would tie his individuality to the action. The daughters did not exhibit a flaw; instead, Moshe excused himself from the scene.

Yitro sensed this ideal in Moshe. He understood that this person was special, possessing a view that set him apart from everyone else. He respected this unique trait, acknowledging his anonymity, removing any description of Moshe other than “man”.

Moshe’s outlook on the world, rather than wanting to merely heap praise on Moshe, led Moshe to “consent” to join Yitro and his family.

All this places Moshe on a pedestal. And yet the Sages critique Moshe for not mentioning his origins. Why was this so important? Yitro’s understanding of the uniqueness of Moshe came at a price. Moshe was unique in contrast

to the culture of Egypt, a society led by a megalomaniac Pharaoh and steeped in idolatry. Moshe, in this view, was the best of the Egyptians. In this instance, Moshe should have sensed an opportunity to teach Yitro and his daughters how his outlook was part of an ideological system, put in place by the patriarchs and matriarchs. The name of the land reflected the ideological stamp placed by his forefathers. As an individual, Moshe’s actions were to be emulated. As a representative of the monotheistic view, obliged to spread the ideas of God to the world, he did not take the necessary step forward. This perceived dissociation from the Jewish outlook would appear to be the target of the rebuke by the Sages.

Notwithstanding this misstep by Moshe, we see an incredibly powerful ideal exhibited by the future leader of the Jewish people. Moshe’s first engaging with the outside world involves his killing of an Egyptian. Yet, in that instance, the story could easily have been one of Moshe siding with his people over the Egyptians. Had the roles been reversed, one might conclude Moshe would never have acted. In the story of the daughters of Yitro, we see Moshe’s view of injustice consecrated in the Torah, a reflection both on the previous and present incidents. To be motivated purely by what is right and wrong is a trait reflecting the actions of the Divine. Moshe is now ready to take the next step.

The Book of Names

Mrs. Michal Horowitz

Sefer Shemos, literally “The Book of Names,” begins with the words: *וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים, מִצְרָיִם: אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ*, and these are the names of the children of Israel, who were coming to Egypt, Yaakov, each man and his household came: Reuven, Shimon, Levi, and Yehuda; Yisachar, Zevulun, and Binyanim; Dan, Naftali, Gad and Asher... and Yosef was in Egypt (Shemos 1:1-5).

The opening to the book of Shemos is information the Torah has already made known to us in Sefer Bereishis, as the pasuk says: *וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי שְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִם, יַעֲקֹב, רְאוּבֵן וּבְנָיו: בְּכֹר יַעֲקֹב, רְאוּבֵן*, and these are the names of the children of Israel who were coming to Egypt, Yaakov and his sons, the firstborn of Yaakov was Reuven (Bereishis 46:8). The Torah then proceeds to delineate the families of Yaakov that came down to Egypt.

As we open the book of Shemos, and we learn about

the painful and oppressive *shibud Mitzrayim* (Egyptian enslavement), why does the Chumash begin with the emphasis on names, and then proceed to enumerate each of the names of the sons of Yaakov?

R’ Yitzchok Zilberstein teaches, “וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת, and these are the names: The holy Shelah (ישעיה בן אברהם הלוי הורוויץ), named after his famous work, the *Sheni Luchot Haverit*, d.1630, buried in Tiberias, Israel) instructs that after Shemoneh Esrei, an individual should recite a verse (from Tanach) that begins with the first letter of his name and ends with the last letter of his name. (For illustrative purposes, my first name is מיכל, and the corresponding pasuk, which begins with a *mem* and ends with a *lamed*, is: *מִה-טְבוּ אֶהְיֶה, יִשְׂרָאֵל* [Bamidbar 24:5].) This is a *segulah* that protects a person from forgetting his name when he will ultimately stand before the Heavenly Court, after his

passing.

“The Nimukei Ridvaz explains that it is common practice for criminals to be identified by a number, instead of their name. This suggests that the criminal is no longer worthy of being considered a person and being called by a name. Similarly, the Ridvaz continues, regarding a person whose heart turns away from Hashem, the Torah warns that *וּמָחָה ה' אֶת שְׁמוֹ*, Hashem will erase his name (Devarim 29:19). In other words, Hashem will strip the sinner of his name and refer to him instead by his crime or misdeed.

“This idea is also expressed in Tehillim (109:13-14), which states: Let their name be erased; may the iniquity of his fathers be remembered before Hashem, and the sin of his mother not be erased. Rather than being remembered by their name, evildoers are remembered by the name of the sin they committed. By remembering our names on the future day of judgement, we demonstrate that we are worthy of being called by a name, not by a number or by the name of a sin” (*Aleinu L'Shabei'ach*, Shemos, p.31-32).

With this teaching in mind, and the significance of a person's name, perhaps we can propose another reason that the second book of Torah is known as Shemos, “Names,” and that the sefer begins by listing the names of the Children of Israel who descended to Egypt.

It is in the first perek (chapter) of Shemos that we learn of the terrible, back breaking labor which the Israelite slaves were subjected to. The Egyptians financially oppressed them, forced them into slave labor, oppressed them with torturous work, and ultimately, killed their sons. The labor was so futile and demeaning, that it was meant only to break the slaves (Rashi to Ex.1:13), both in body and spirit. The infanticide was meant to erase any future vestige of Am Yisrael: *וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדָּךְ אֶת-הָעִבְרִיּוֹת, וְרָאִיתָ, עַל- וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדָּךְ אֶת-הָעִבְרִיּוֹת, וְרָאִיתָ, עַל- וַיֹּאמֶר בְּיַלְדָּךְ אֶת-הָעִבְרִיּוֹת, וְרָאִיתָ, עַל-* and Pharaoh said to the midwives: when you birth the Hebrews, and you will see upon the birthing stool, if it is a boy, you shall put him to death, and if it is a girl, she shall live (Shemos 1:16).

In an environment such as this one, when the enemy tries to strip the slave of his very essence and humanity, it

is possible for the tortured, exhausted, and broken slave to think of himself as a mere number, and forget that he ever had a name... To counter this, the story of the shibud Mitzrayim begins with the following words: *וְאֵלֶּה, שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל* - and these are the NAMES of the children of Israel. No matter what the enemy does to try to destroy us, we remember that we always have a pure, untainted, untouchable essence - the neshama and spirit of a Jew - and it is that very spirit that is represented in our names. For though in each and every generation they arise to destroy us, the names, the Shemos, of the Bnei Yisrael, are eternal.

One summer, during his stay in the Catskill Mountains, R' Moshe Feinstein zt'l was being seen by a doctor and his wife, a nurse, both of whom were Holocaust survivors. The pair was far removed from the world of yeshivos, and only knew that their patient was a famous rabbi. One day, the nurse said to her nephew, Yitzchak Herschkopf, who had come to visit, “We have one patient who is a celebrity. His name is Rabbi Moshe Feinstein. He has an appointment tomorrow, would you like to meet him?”

Yitzchak, who had learned under R' Moshe's son-in-law, R' Moshe Tendler, was excited beyond words. The next day, he donned his Shabbos clothing and seated himself in the doctor's waiting room. A few minutes later, R' Moshe entered, accompanied by a family member. The nurse - Yitzchak's aunt - came to receive R' Moshe. She spoke to him as if they were close friends, in an affectionate - but wholly inappropriate - manner.

As soon as she left the room, Yitzchak began to apologize for his aunt's behavior. R' Moshe quickly put his finger to the boy's lips to silence him and said, “She has numbers on her arm,” he said softly, “she is holier than I am” (Reb Moshe, Artsroll, p.266-267).

As you suffer through the pain and tribulations of galus, the Chumash tells us, and as the enemy - from Pharaonic Egypt to Nazi Germany R”L - tries mightily to remove our identity from us, never, ever forget: these are the names of the Children of Israel who were coming to Egypt.

For our identity, our names, our essence, and our souls, can never be extinguished or destroyed.

What Was Yocheved Thinking?

Rabbi Alex Hecht

One can only imagine the pain of the Jewish parents whose newborn sons were taken from them following delivery to be killed, in fulfillment of Pharaoh's decree. (Shemot 1:16) The Torah tells us of one case in which a mother, Yocheved, attempted to conceal her baby, Moshe, from Pharaoh's officers. Nevertheless, after three months, it became impossible to hide him any longer; Yocheved put her son in a wicker basket, and placed it in the Nile River. (Shemot 2:2-3)

Although there is every reason to believe that Yocheved did not want her son harmed, it would seem that this action positioned him for as certain a death as handing him over to Pharaoh's officers. What fate did Yocheved expect her son to encounter when she placed him in the river? We may suggest four answers.

1: Death

Rabbi Avraham ibn Ezra (commentary to 2:3) explained that Yocheved expected that her son would likely die in the raging river; however, she wanted to at least avoid seeing - or knowing definitively - that her son was killed. This is similar to the Torah's account of Hagar casting Yishmael under a bush after their water supply was depleted, saying, "Let me not see the death of the child." (Bereishit 21:15-16)

This explanation, and the analogy to Hagar, are troubling. As Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch comments (ad loc.), Hagar seems to have been more concerned with her personal emotions than with her son's well-being!

2: Miriam

We may suggest that Yocheved did not abandon Moshe at all; she knew Miriam would look out for him. As Shemot 2:4 informs us, "His sister [Miriam] stood from afar to know what would be with him." (Shemot 2:4)

Further, the Talmud tells us that Miriam had already prophesied that Moshe would live to become the saviour of the Jewish people. She watched the basket in order to see the manner in which this prophecy would be fulfilled.

(Sotah 13a) Perhaps Yocheved put Moshe in the river with the understanding that Moshe would indeed be monitored, and that Miriam had foretold his survival.

3: Fooling the Astrologers

In a third approach, a midrash (Shemot Rabbah 1:21) explains that Yocheved believed that placing her son into the river would be the means through which he would be saved: Pharaoh's decree against the newborn boys had been a response to an astrological prediction that a boy was destined to be born who would redeem his people. (ibid. 1:18) Those same astrologers had predicted that this redeemer would be harmed via water. (ibid.) Yocheved reasoned that once this projected saviour was placed into the river, the Egyptian astrologers would become aware of this and would believe that the threat had been eliminated. Pharaoh would immediately rescind the decree, allowing Yocheved to recover Moshe without fear of discovery.

4: Adoption

Rabbi Ovadia Seforno (commentary to Shemot 2:3-4) references our third explanation, and then adds that Miriam was confident that a nearby Egyptian who discovered the basket would adopt the baby. She was not concerned that the Egyptians would suspect Moshe of being a Jew; he alleges that it was not out of the ordinary to find abandoned children who were products of illicit relationships in Egypt. Seforno supports this assertion from the prophet Yechezkel's description of Egypt as the ultimate centre of depravity, to which many Jews in his time were attracted: "Then she increased her adulteries, remembering the days of her youth, when she was promiscuous in the land of Egypt." (Yechezkel 23:19, ArtScroll tr.) Perhaps this was not only Miriam's thought, but also Yocheved's plan.

According to the last three explanations, Yocheved was not sealing Moshe's fate when she placed him into the river. To the contrary, she was confident that this painful action of parting with her son would enable him to survive and fulfill his mission.