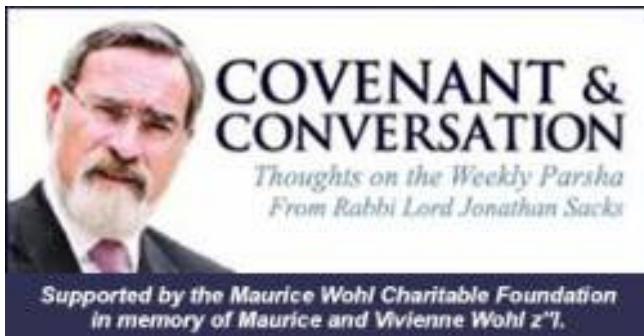


## In this Issue

- **Covenant and Conversation** by *Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*
- **M'oray Ha'Aish** by *Rabbi Ari Kahn*
- **Mayanot** by *Rabbi Noson Weisz*
- **Rabbi Frand On the Weekly Torah Portion** by *Rabbi Yissocher Frand*



## The Story We Tell About Ourselves

Sometimes others know us better than we know ourselves. In the year 2000, a British Jewish research institute came up with a proposal that Jews in Britain be redefined as an ethnic group and not as a religious community. It was a non-Jewish journalist, Andrew Marr, who stated what should have been obvious. He said: "All this is shallow water, and the further in you wade, the shallower it gets."

It is what he wrote next that I found inspirational: "The Jews have always had stories for the rest of

us. They have had their Bible, one of the great imaginative works of the human spirit. They have been victim of the worst modernity can do, a mirror for Western madness. Above all they have had the story of their cultural and genetic survival from the Roman Empire to the 2000s, weaving and thriving amid uncomprehending, hostile European tribes."<sup>1</sup>

*The Jews have always had stories for the rest of us.* I love that testimony. And indeed, from early on, storytelling has been central to the Jewish tradition. Every culture has its stories. (The late Elie Wiesel once said, "God created man because God loves stories"). Almost certainly, the tradition goes back to the days when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers telling stories around the campfire at night. We are the storytelling animal.

But what is truly remarkable is the way in which, in this week's parsha, on the brink of the Exodus, Moses three times tells the Israelites how they are to tell the story to their children in future generations.

[1] When your children ask you, 'What does this ceremony mean to you?' *then tell them*, 'It is the Passover sacrifice to the Lord, who passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared our homes when He struck down the Egyptians.' (Ex. 12:26-27)

[2] *On that day tell your child*, 'I do this because of what the Lord did for me when I came out of Egypt.' (Ex. 13:8)

[3] "In days to come, when your child asks you, 'What does this mean?' say, 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. (Ex. 13:14)

*The Israelites had not yet left Egypt, and yet already Moses was telling them how to tell the story. That is the extraordinary fact. Why so? Why this obsession with storytelling?*

The simplest answer is that *we are the story we tell ourselves*.<sup>2</sup> There is an intrinsic, perhaps necessary, link between narrative and identity. In the words of the thinker who did more than most to place this idea at the centre of contemporary thought, Alasdair MacIntyre, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal."<sup>3</sup> We come to know who we are by discovering of which story or stories we are a part.

Jerome Bruner has persuasively argued that narrative is central to the construction of meaning, and meaning is what makes the human condition human.<sup>4</sup> No computer needs to be persuaded of its purpose in life before it does what it is supposed to do. Genes need no motivational encouragement. No virus needs a coach. We do not have to enter their mindset to understand what they do and how they do it, because they do not have a mindset to enter. But humans do. We act in the present because of things we did or that happened to us in the past, and in order to realise a sought-for future. Even minimally to explain what we are doing is already to tell a story. Take three people eating salad in a restaurant, one because he needs to lose weight, the second

because she's a principled vegetarian, the third because of religious dietary laws. These are three outwardly similar acts, but they belong to different stories and they have different meanings for the people involved.

Why though storytelling and the Exodus?

One of the most powerful passages I have ever read on the nature of Jewish existence is contained in Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Considerations on the Government of Poland* (1772). This is an unlikely place to find insight on the Jewish condition, but it is there. Rousseau is talking about the greatest of political leaders. First of these, he says, was Moses who "formed and executed the astonishing enterprise of instituting as a national body a swarm of wretched fugitives who had no arts, no weapons, no talents, no virtues, no courage, and who, since they had not an inch of territory of their own, were a troop of strangers upon the face of the earth."

Moses, he says, "dared to make out of this wandering and servile troop a body politic, a free people, and while it wandered in the wilderness without so much as a stone on which to rest its head, gave it the lasting institution, proof against time, fortune and conquerors, which 5000 years have not been able to destroy or even to weaken." This singular nation, he says, so often subjugated and scattered, "has nevertheless maintained itself down to our days, scattered among the other nations without ever merging with them."<sup>5</sup>

Moses' genius, he says, lay in the nature of the laws that kept Jews as a people apart. But that is only half the story. The other half lies in this week's parsha, in the institution of storytelling as

a fundamental religious duty, recalling and re-enacting the events of the Exodus every year, and in particular, making children central to the story. Noting that in three of the four storytelling passages (three in our parsha, the fourth in *Va'etchanan*) children are referred to as asking questions, the Sages held that the narrative of Seder night should be told in response to a question asked by a child wherever possible. If we are the story we tell about ourselves, then as long as we never lose the story, we will never lose our identity.

This idea found expression some years ago in a fascinating encounter. Tibet has been governed by the Chinese since 1950. During the 1959 uprising, the Dalai Lama, his life in danger, fled to Dharamsala in India where he and many of his followers have lived ever since. Realising that their stay in exile might be prolonged, in 1992 he decided to ask Jews, whom he regarded as the world's experts in maintaining identity in exile, for advice. What, he wanted to know, was the secret? The story of that week-long encounter has been told by Roger Kamenetz in his book, *The Jew in the Lotus*.<sup>6</sup> One of the things they told him was the importance of memory and storytelling in keeping a people's culture and identity alive. They spoke about Pesach and the Seder service in particular. So in 1997 Rabbis and American dignitaries held a special Seder service in Washington DC with the Dalai Lama. He wrote this to the participants:

In our dialogue with Rabbis and Jewish scholars, the Tibetan people have learned about the secrets of Jewish spiritual survival in exile: one

secret is the Passover Seder. Through it for 2000 years, even in very difficult times, Jewish people remember their liberation from slavery to freedom and this has brought you hope in times of difficulty. We are grateful to our Jewish brothers and sisters for adding to their celebration of freedom the thought of freedom for the Tibetan people.

Cultures are shaped by the range of stories to which they give rise. Some of these have a special role in shaping the self-understanding of those who tell them. We call them *master-narratives*. They are about large, ongoing groups of people: the tribe, the nation, the civilisation. They hold the group together horizontally across space and vertically across time, giving it a shared identity handed on across the generations.

None has been more powerful than the Exodus story, whose frame and context is set out in our parsha. It gave Jews the most tenacious identity ever held by a nation. In the eras of oppression, it gave hope of freedom. At times of exile, it promised return. It told two hundred generations of Jewish children who they were and of what story they were a part. It became the world's master-narrative of liberty, adopted by an astonishing variety of groups, from Puritans in the 17th century to African-Americans in the 19th and to Tibetan Buddhists today.

I believe that I am a character in our people's story, with my own chapter to write, and so are we all. To be a Jew is to see yourself as part of that story, to make it live in our time, and to do

your best to hand it on to those who will come after us.

1. Andrew Marr, *The Observer*, Sunday 14 May, 2000.
2. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory*, London, Duckworth, 1981; Dan P. McAdams, *The Stories We Live By: Personal Myths And The Making Of The Self*, New York, Guilford Press, 1997.
3. MacIntyre though, *op. cit.*, 201.
4. Jerome Bruner, *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Harvard University Press, 1986.
5. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract and other later political writings*, Cambridge University press, 2010, 180.
6. Roger Kamanetz, *The Jew in the Lotus*, HarperOne, 2007.



## The Steps to Freedom

Leaving Egypt was not a quick fix; it was a slow process, made up of many stages. While each plague made Pharaoh more defiant, more stubborn, the Jews, who looked on in awe at the humbling of Egypt, were strengthened in their belief in the God of their fathers and mothers. God's sudden involvement in human history was dramatic, and it reinforced the faith of the slaves in the promise of freedom that had been handed down from one generation to the next.

As the days, weeks, and months wore on, the Egyptians became preoccupied with their own survival. Still reeling from the previous plague, they braced themselves for the next display of

Divine wrath. With each passing day, they had less and less energy to spend on routine matters, and the vise around the necks of the slaves loosened. As the masters devolved into cowering, trembling victims of Pharaoh's coldhearted policy of denial, the Hebrew slaves were gradually liberated from their servitude - simply because their masters were preoccupied with their own survival.

Parashat Bo describes the plague of darkness, during which the Egyptians were completely incapacitated, but the Jews, who were no longer slaves, were not quite free. Several more stages of emancipation would have to ensue before their transformation would be complete, and these would come in rapid succession, in the course of less than twenty-four hours: First, they Jews would hold the prototypical Passover Seder, which would be followed first by the death of Egypt's firstborn at midnight, and then, finally, by their own march to freedom, in broad daylight, the following day. Each of these elements was a distinct stage in their emancipation.

The most obvious aspect of their freedom is the exodus itself, as they walked out of Egypt after a night of awe and wonders. At that point, they were truly free: A nation emerged from under the oppression of another nation. Their journey to the Land flowing with milk and honey had begun, albeit after a stop at the mountain known as Sinai. Although their march to the Promised Land would take longer than they anticipated, they made their journey as a free and independent nation.

The night before, Egypt had been struck; every Egyptian family was in mourning for their own firstborn. Egyptian culture was built on a hierarchical system of primogeniture, in which the firstborn ruled the family by controlling the younger siblings who in turn, controlled the lower classes, who in turn controlled the slaves. Pharaoh himself was the firstborn of the firstborn of the firstborn; as Rabbi Soloveitchik, echoing his great-grandfather Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehudah Berlin (*Ha'amek Davar*, Shmot 15:1), explained, the entire Egyptian economy was based on the ascending order of privilege and power, and rested on slave labor. The visual representation of this system is the pyramid - with Pharaoh at its pinnacle, and the plague of the firstborn brought this pyramid of power crashing down. In a very real sense, the final plague liberated the Egyptians from the tyranny of their own political and economic system at the stroke of midnight.

With his empire in ruins and his own family decimated, Pharaoh commands the Jews to leave Egypt, but in a final act of defiance, the Jews disregard Pharaoh's command. They refuse to sneak out like thieves in the night, and instead choose to leave on their own terms, in their own time, in broad daylight. The time and terms of their departure bolster their dignity and sense of personal liberty, while simultaneously giving their erstwhile oppressor one final slap in the face: Pharaoh, the self-styled "sun god," cannot bend a nation of slaves to his will, even under the blazing sun.

Only a few hours earlier, the Jews experienced another stage of freedom. As each extended family gathered for the sacrifice of the Paschal

lamb offering, the Jews - for a first time in a very long time - experienced religious freedom. The symbol of Egypt was sacrificed to the God of Israel, and its blood was displayed for all to see, on the doorposts of every Jewish home.

There are many facets of emancipation, many kinds of freedom: Religious freedom, political freedom, economic freedom, national self-definition and self-determination. Step by step, God led the Jews through the many stages that brought them their complete freedom, allowing them to appreciate and savor each step along the way.

This multi-stage process addresses another very human need: As each aspect of freedom is experienced, the imagination of the not-yet-emancipated slave is re-awakened. After generations of slavery, they are given a taste of freedom that stirs them, for the first time, to imagine, to anticipate, to look to the future and envision a new reality. The Targum (Pseudo) Yonatan illustrates this concept in a brief but fascinating comment:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to Me. (Shmot 19:4).

The straightforward reading of the verse is sequential: First, God took us out of Egypt, and then He brought us to Mount Sinai ("brought you to Me"). Targum (Pseudo) Yonatan's read is very different:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians; and how I took you upon clouds which are comparable to



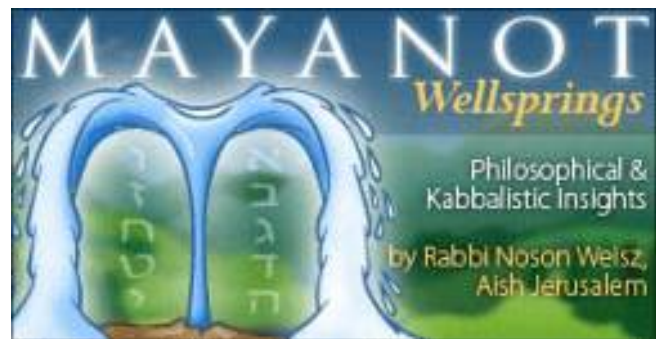
eagles' wings, from Ramses, to the place of the *Beit Hamikdash*, there to perform the Passover (offering); and in the same night I brought you back to Ramses, and from there have brought you here, to (receive) the instruction of My Torah. (Targum (Pseudo) Yonatan, Shmot 19:4)

This interpretation suggests that on the night of Passover, before midnight, the Jews were transported from their primitive slave dwellings to the glorious Temple in Jerusalem, where they sacrificed the Paschal offering and observed the Passover seder. Rather than telling us what happened that night, the Targum (Pseudo) Yonatan may be trying to convey what the Jews **experienced** that night: Having achieved religious freedom, they felt as if they were in Jerusalem, a free people celebrating Passover in the Holy Temple, the heart of their Homeland. The act of religious freedom, of serving God as proud and free Jews, gave them the ability to believe in all of the other aspects of their freedom. Experientially, they were in Jerusalem that night. They were free - in mind, in spirit, in thought, in belief. All that remained was to relocate.

Every year, every Jew relives this experience. The objective of the celebration of Passover is to transport our extended family - each and every extended family that makes up the People of Israel - to Jerusalem. Whether in North Africa or Warsaw, in luxury or in poverty, free or under foreign domination, celebrating Passover enabled Jews throughout history, regardless of the boundaries of time and place, to feel what it meant to leave Egypt. More than that, it allowed

them to feel what it is like to be completely free, and to celebrate that freedom in Jerusalem.

Perhaps (Pseudo) Yonatan allowed his own imagination to run wild; historically, factually, the Jews celebrated Passover in Egypt that night. Experientially, though, he captured what the Jews felt that night in Egypt. The first step to emancipation is the belief that freedom is possible. Only when we believe that it can be done we begin to hope, to yearn. Only then can we be truly free.



## Who Needs Miracles Anyway?

One of the intellectual challenges presented by the Exodus story is how to account for the phenomenon of the plagues. Why did God need miraculous plagues to accomplish the Exodus? If we human beings were presented with the problem of rescuing the Jewish people from the bondage of Egypt, no doubt we would be compelled to exert some sort of force to impose our will on a reluctant Pharaoh. But God doesn't share our limitations. Just as He had no difficulty in hardening Pharaoh's heart, He could have gone

in the other direction and softened it, and thus obtained the release of the Jewish people without the need for any suffering on the part of anyone.

## THE RETRIBUTION FACTOR

No doubt retribution for the oppression of Jews is a factor, but looking over the troubled history of the Jewish people, and the many occasions when we were in the grip of oppressive bondage to various tyrants, it is difficult to find other instances where our oppressors were made to suffer immediate retribution in the process of our release. Retribution alone is therefore inadequate to account for the phenomenon of the plagues.

Nachmonides (Exodus 13:17) offers an explanation, which not only explains the need for the plagues, but also accounts for the seemingly disproportionate emphasis placed on the remembrance of the Exodus in the commandments of the Torah. As most people are aware, there are quite a few mitzvot that are described by the Torah as having been given to us specifically in order to preserve and commemorate the Exodus.

## THE PROOF VALUE FACTOR

His thesis is the following: at the time of the Exodus there were conflicting ideas concerning God among thinking human beings. One stream of thought rejected the idea of God's existence and the notion of a created universe altogether. Another believed that there was a God, and He did indeed create the universe, but He has no notion of what is taking place within it. He exists in the nature of Aristotle's first cause. A third stream believed that God not only created the

universe but also knows what is going on but He doesn't care to interfere in the affairs of the world. Only a tiny fraction of mankind gave credence to a world run by Divine providence.

Reference is made to all these strands of thought in the Parsha:

*And on that day I shall set apart the land of Goshen on which My people stands, that there shall be no swarm there; so that you will know that I am God in the midst of the land. (Ibid. 8:18)*

Orev, the plague of the mixed swarm of animals, establishes that God pays attention to detail, and that Divine Providence is capable of making distinctions between peoples and territories at will.

*Moses said to him, "When I leave the city, I shall spread out my hands to God; the thunder will cease and the hail will no longer be, so that you shall know that the earth is God's. (Ibid. 9:18)*

The plague of *Barad*, the fiery hail, was sent to establish God's ability to alter creation at His whim.

*For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart, and upon your servants, and your people, so that you shall know that there is none like Me in all the world. (Ibid. 9:14)*

This is a reference to the plague of the death of the first born, which established God's absolute control over all life.

## **WHO NEEDED THE PROOF?**

The essence of Nachmonides' thesis is that God wanted to refute all the false positions regarding His existence and His attributes as a prelude to the Exodus -- not to prove anything to the Egyptians -- but to lay the foundations of proper belief among the Jews. He needed the Exodus to supply Him with a people who would maintain their firm belief in a world directed by Divine Providence as an axiom of life. As we pointed out in previous essays, the spiritual energy that powered the Exodus was the fact that it leads directly to the acceptance of the Torah at Sinai. In the absence of total clarity on the part of the Jewish people regarding the existence of God and the true nature of His Attributes, the prospects for long term Torah observance were bleak at best.

But God had no intention of repeating the miraculous intervention in human affairs that was the hallmark of the Exodus process. Proving His existence repeatedly is antithetical to His policy of allowing man the liberty of selecting for himself through his own free will directed intelligence how he chooses to interpret the world. God's idea was to transform the remembrance of the Exodus experience [and therefore the proof of His existence] into a free will exercise.

## **HOW CONCLUSIVE PROOF CAN BE A MATTER OF CHOICE**

The mechanism of the transformation is the provision of the Mitzvot through which the Exodus is commemorated.

If we assume that God designed the mitzvot to really work, actually producing the results that

they were designed to accomplish, which is not an unreasonable assumption in light of the fact that God designed both the mitzvot and the human beings who perform them, then it becomes quite clear how preserving the proofs of God's existence and the knowledge of His attributes becomes a matter of free will. God simply tied the remembrance of the Exodus to the performance of mitzvot.

Any Jew who takes the free will decision to wear his phylacteries, (Tefillin), or to put a Mezuzah on his door and observe the commandments of Passover and Tabernacles or any other Mitzvah that was given to commemorate the Exodus, is always able to retain the proof provided by the miracles of the Exodus as part of his living consciousness. But all others will eventually forget or come to doubt the veracity of even these unforgettable events.

## **THE LESSON OF THE HOLOCAUST**

As we know from the Holocaust, the memory and impact of extraordinary historical incidents fades rapidly indeed. Because the Holocaust was such an impossibly unlikely event, some people find it difficult to give it credence a short half century after it was concluded, and this in spite of the extensive records and even pictures available. If this is true of the Holocaust how much more does this apply to the Exodus. The Exodus lives on only in the mitzvot that commemorate it.

We can make use of this thesis of Nachmonides to reach a deeper level of understanding concerning the revelations of the Exodus and the power of Mitzvot in general.



## **GOD AS PURE INTELLIGENCE**

Most people picture God as a kind of pure intelligence. After all, Jewish tradition teaches that He is incorporeal. He can't really feel things and experience emotions. It is inconceivable to imagine Him being swept away or overwhelmed by the heat of the moment.

If we really ponder this deeply, our impression is largely attributable to the fact that we always experience contact with God through the medium of nature and never directly. When He answers our prayers and heals the sick relative, when we land the job or arrive safely at our destinations, there is always a natural process involved. If we believe that our good fortune comes in answer to our prayers, we look at these phenomena as God altering nature for our benefit.

For us human beings the process of altering nature always requires careful planning and the application of often complex technologies. Strategic planning or developing technologies always requires the objective application of intelligence. As we can only relate to things on our own terms, we tend to impute our own methodology and approach to God.

We relate to the Exodus in terms of problem solving. In our terms God had a problem. He thought it through, applied the technology of the plagues and out popped the solution, the Exodus.

## **THE CLEAR GLIMPSE OF GOD OFFERED BY THE PLAGUES**

This view is incorrect. To accomplish the Exodus, God did away with nature altogether. Some of the plagues are obviously not altered natural

phenomena. There is no natural way to make fiery hail or thick darkness or to kill people without any sort of trauma or disease. These phenomena represent outright violations of natural law rather than altered natural processes.

With the concealing curtain of nature out of the way, human beings not only had a vision of God, but were able to perceive God Himself. The difference is striking. You can't go into a room to commune with a vision. Visions are not alive. They merely represent something else which is alive. By removing the concealing curtain of nature, God allowed human beings to experience contact with Him as a living personality. They could get to be familiar with his personality, character and emotions. They could learn to relate to Him in human terms.

*God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am YHVH. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as El Shaddai but with My Name YHVH I did not make Myself known to them. (Exodus 6:2-3)*

Explains Nachmonides: the name *El Shaddai* personifies God as the power that bends nature to His will. Thus, while natural processes have no inherent correlation to moral merit, God bent natural law and forced Mother Nature to pour out Her bounty on the Patriarchs.

They were well fed when the rest of the world went hungry, they were able to emerge victorious in battle against enormous odds, and they all grew enormously wealthy. In short they led magically successful lives. All the blessings of the Torah are of this nature and come under the name *El Shaddai*.

*YHVH* personifies God as the source of all being. This aspect of God becomes visible only when nature gets out of the way and the entire universe can be clearly perceived as nothing more than Divine Energy. This aspect of God was revealed in the Exodus. Moses never refers to God as *El Shaddai* because the level of interaction with God that his prophecy introduces can only be enunciated by the Name *YHVH*.

## **REVELATION OF THE EXODUS AS THEY APPEAR IN PRAYER**

We can bring this idea down to earth a little by asking one of the classic questions concerning prayer. If we accept the proof of God supplied by the Exodus as Nachmonides suggests, and take it as fact that God is not only all knowing but that He also cares about our situation, we are going to have a problem with prayer.

For we are then compelled to assume that God is aware of our particular needs and problems, and they concern and even trouble Him. Since God controls everything, it follows that the things we lack and the problems we are struggling with must be understood as His carefully thought out response to our free will decisions or as the testing ground tailor designed to fit our particular individual characters. We are exactly in the situation that we need to be in for our maximum

benefit. So why are we asking God to change it? Even more to the point, why do we expect Him to respond to our prayers? Do we know better than God how the world ought to function? How do we expect to change His mind?

## **PRAYER AS EMOTIONAL INTERACTION**

The answer: we relate to God in our prayers as though He were a being with emotions and character. We do not relate to Him as a problem solver. In terms of emotions and character it is easy to see how prayer might be extremely effective. We all react to what people do in terms of how we feel about them. A and B are both unkind to C. I like A very much and I really dislike B. I will find excuses and explanations for A's unkindness. In my mind A is a kind person because I like him. His unkindness towards C does not stem from a defect of character but from some circumstance.

But I will not apply this standard to B. After all, I really don't like B. He is a negative character in my judgment. When I see B being unkind I attribute it to defects in his character not to the accidents of circumstance.

If I could relate to God as though He had character and emotions, then I could attempt to get close to Him just as I attempt to forge an emotional relationship with people I like and admire. Just as feelings are reciprocal as a general rule in human relationships, and the way I feel toward someone is generally a mirror image of the way they feel towards me, so it is with God.

As I dedicate my being to God in prayer and bring myself closer to Him, He also grows closer to me.

As God's attitude toward me as a person changes, the way He perceives and relates to my situation automatically alters. Instead of regarding me objectively and figuring out the appropriate life-situation for me from a problem solving perspective, He regards me as a close friend and considers my situation and actions in the way one perceives the situation and actions of those who are dear to Him. If my prayer is affective, God will treat me with affection instead of objectivity.

**THE EXODUS AS A GIANT STEP FOR MANKIND**

The Exodus is a giant step forward and upward in the way God relates to us. God Himself defines His relationship with Abraham as being purposeful rather than personal. When God was about to destroy Sodom, He decided to tell Abraham about it first, and he shares His deliberations about this need for prior disclosure with us:

*And God said, "Shall I conceal from Abraham what I do, now that Abraham is surely to become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him? For I have loved him, because he commands his children and his household after him that they keep the way of God, doing charity and justice, in order that then God might bring upon Abraham that which He had spoken of him." (Genesis 18:17-18)*

God Himself thus defines His relationship with Abraham as based on historic purpose. Abraham will instruct his children to keep the ways of God and accomplish God's design in creation, and in

return God loves Abraham and shares His intentions with him and consults with him about matters of historic importance. This type of historic purpose based relationship is the opposite of personal. Each side is committed to the achievement of a common goal, and is respectfully consulted as long as he remains committed to working out his share of the common task.

The Exodus is more. In the miracles of the Exodus God committed Himself to a relationship with the Jewish people that has no connection with the historic process and is based on love itself. The very point of the miracles of the Exodus is that they weren't needed to accomplish the historic purpose of releasing the Jewish people from the Egyptian bondage to honor God's promise to Abraham. In shaping a miraculous Exodus, God was informing us, the Jewish people, that He was ready to commit to a relationship that was based on mutual affection rather than just mutual interest.

**THE LESSON OF THE EXODUS AS IT APPLIES TO MITZVOT**

This gives us an insight into all mitzvot. Mitzvot should not be regarded exclusively from a problem solving perspective. While no doubt the mitzvot are also designed to fulfill the historic purpose of the Jewish people and establish the Dominion of God on earth, they are much more than that. The mitzvot were also given to us as a means of maintaining the personal contact with God that was established through the miracles of the Exodus. The Mitzvoth are a demonstration of our love for God and of His affection for us. The

entire mighty universe is out there for Him to take an interest in, but He takes joy from watching a Jew put on His phylacteries.

But if this is true of Mitzvot in general, how much more does this apply to those that were given specifically to commemorate the Exodus. As the Exodus represents the initiation of the relationship with God for its own sake, just because He loves us and we love Him, the Mitzvot that commemorate it and keep this feeling alive are the most intense focus of this mutual affection. Keeping the Exodus alive is the engine that drives Jewish life.



## The Message of the Firstborn

The last and most spectacular of the plagues was the plague of the firstborn, during which Hashem skipped over every Jewish firstborn and slew every Egyptian firstborn. Because of this miracle, the firstborn of the Jewish people, human and animal, are forever sanctified. Originally, the firstborn were to be the priests who performed the holy service in the *Beis Hamikdash*, but they lost this privilege when they sinned with the Golden

Calf. Nonetheless, despite their fall from grace, the firstborn still remained sanctified regarding *pidyon haben*, firstborn animals and other observances.

Rav Simchah Zissel, the Alter of Kelm, once wrote a letter to Baron Rothschild, praising him for his exertions on behalf of the Jewish people. In this letter, Rav Simchah Zissel raises an interesting question. What did the Jewish firstborn do in Egypt to earn this high level of sanctification? True, they were involved in a great *kiddush Hashem*, but did they do anything at all to make it happen? They contributed nothing to their rescue during the plague. They also had nothing to do with their being born first. Everything happened without their involvement and assistance. Their role was absolutely passive.

Clearly, even passive participation in a *kiddush Hashem* is a very great thing. A person gains tremendous merit if Hashem chooses him to play a role in a *kiddush Hashem*, even if it is only a passive role.

"If this is the reward for a person who has a passive role in a *kiddush Hashem*," wrote Rav Simchah Zissel, "how can we even begin to imagine the reward of a person that actively makes a *kiddush Hashem*? You, Baron Rothschild, considering who you are and what you have done, have actively and publicly sanctified the Name of Hashem, and there is no limit to the honor, respect and gratitude you have earned."

This is the lesson we must all draw from the mitzvah of *pidyon haben*. If a passive contribution to a *kiddush Hashem* sanctified the firstborn, we

can be sure that an active contribution would certainly provide at least such a level of sanctification if not a greater one. And the opportunities are always there for us. We can make a *kiddush Hashem* in the way we conduct our daily lives, the way we walk, the way we talk, the way we negotiate, the way we do business, the way we treat other people, both Jewish and non-Jewish. It is within our power to cause people who observe us to remark (*Yoma* 86a), "Look at him! Look how beautifully a religious Jew behaves." This is such an easy way to make a *kiddush Hashem*, such an easy way to gain tremendous reward both in this world and the next.

One of the rules of *pidyon haben* is that only the natural firstborn of the mother is sanctified as a *bechor*, a holy firstborn. If the child is the first for the father but not for the mother, or if he is delivered by caesarean section, he is not a *bechor*.

Let us think for a moment. What is the reason for the mitzvah of *bechor*? It reminds us that Hashem skipped over the Jewish firstborn while He was slaying the Egyptian firstborn. Now, the Talmud tells us specifically that Hashem slew all the firstborn of Egypt, both the firstborn for the mother and the firstborn for the father or any other way they can be construed as a firstborn. If so, shouldn't the mitzvah of *bechor* also extend to both the firstborn for the mother and the firstborn for the father?

The Avnei Shoham offers a solution based on an analogy to the mitzvah of *bikurim*, the offering of the first fruits. What is the purpose of bringing the first fruits? The Torah tells us (*Devarim* 8:17-18),

"And you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand created all this wealth.' Then you shall remember Hashem your Lord, for He is the One that gives you the power to create wealth."

A person can easily fall into the trap of thinking that everything comes to him naturally. He planted the seed. He nurtured it. The tree grew. It gave fruit. It was all natural, with no involvement from Hashem. But when we bring the first fruits to the *Beis Hamikdash* we are reminded that the most natural process still requires the miraculous intervention of Hashem, that we are always dependent on Divine providence no matter how naturally everything seems to be coming our way.

The mitzvah of *bechor* has a similar message. When we have a firstborn child, we may easily fall into the same trap. When people have all sorts of trouble having a child, they turn to Hashem and plead with him. And when the child is finally born, they know full well that it is a priceless gift from Hashem. But when things go normally, they may not realize that the child is just as great a gift from Hashem. People get married, they have a child, and they think: What could be more normal, more natural? They forget that they owe Hashem an enormous debt of gratitude. This is the role of the mitzvah of *bechor*. It reminds them that Hashem spread a protective wing over all the firstborn Jewish children in Egypt. Just as those firstborns were a Divine gift to their parents, so are all the firstborns and all other children for all generations.

The Torah, however, chooses to give us this reminder only when everything goes normally





and naturally, because that is when we are most likely to forget that we have to thank Hashem. We are less likely to make this mistake when things do not go with the greatest smoothness, and therefore, the Torah does not deem a reminder necessary.

When a child is the firstborn to his mother by natural birth, everything has indeed gone as expected. But when he is the firstborn only to his father and not to his mother, something has obviously gone off the track. The mother may have had a child by a previous marriage that didn't work out. If the child was born by caesarean section, it is also a deviation from the normal and natural. In such cases, we are already painfully aware that our fate is in Hashem's hands, and we don't need the mitzvah of *bechor* to remind us of it.

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