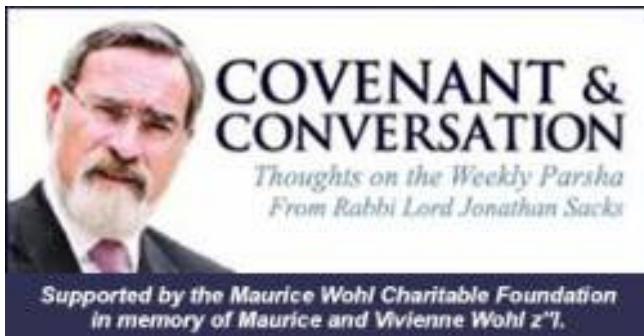


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Overcoming Setbacks

At first, Moses' mission seemed to be successful. He had feared that the people would not believe in him, but God had given him signs to perform, and his brother Aaron to speak on his behalf.

Moses "performed the signs before the people, and they believed. And when they heard that the Lord was concerned about them and had seen their misery, they bowed down and worshiped." (Ex. 4:30-31)

But then things start to go wrong, and continue going wrong. Moses' first appearance before Pharaoh is disastrous. Pharaoh refuses to

recognise God. He rejects Moses' request to let the people travel into the wilderness. He makes life worse for the Israelites. They must still make the same quota of bricks, but now they must also gather their own straw. The people turn against Moses and Aaron: "May the Lord look on you and judge you! You have made us obnoxious to Pharaoh and his officials and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Ex. 5:21)

Moses and Aaron return to Pharaoh to renew their request. They perform a sign – they turn a staff into a snake – but Pharaoh is unimpressed. His own magicians can do likewise. Next they bring the first of the plagues, but again Pharaoh is unmoved. He will not let the Israelites go. And so it goes, nine times. Moses does everything in his power and finds that nothing makes a difference. The Israelites are still slaves.

We sense the pressure Moses is under. After his first setback, at the end of last week's parsha, he turns to God and bitterly complains: "Why, Lord, why have You brought trouble on this people? Is this why You sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has brought trouble on this people, and You have not rescued Your people at all." (Ex. 5:22-23)

In this week's parsha of Vaera, even though God has reassured him that he will eventually succeed, he replies, "If the Israelites will not listen to me, why would Pharaoh listen to me, since I speak with faltering lips?" (Ex. 6:12).

There is an enduring message here. Leadership, even of the very highest order, is often marked by failure. The first Impressionists had to arrange

their own exhibition because their work was rejected by the Paris salons. The first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* caused a riot, with the audience booing throughout. Van Gogh sold only one painting in his lifetime despite the fact that his brother Theo was an art dealer.

So it is with leaders. Abraham Lincoln faced countless setbacks during the Civil War. He was a deeply divisive figure, hated by many in his lifetime. Gandhi failed in his dream of uniting Muslims and Hindus together in a single nation. Nelson Mandela spent twenty-seven years in prison, accused of treason and regarded as a violent agitator. Winston Churchill was regarded as a spent force in politics by the 1930s, and even after his heroic leadership during the Second World War was voted out of office at the first General Election after the war was over. Only in retrospect do heroes seem heroic and the many setbacks they faced reveal themselves as stepping-stones on the road to victory.

In our discussion of parshat Vayetse, we saw that in every field – high or low, sacred or secular - leaders are tested not by their successes but by their failures. It can sometimes be easy to succeed. The conditions may be favourable. The economic, political or personal climate is good. When there is an economic boom, most businesses flourish. In the first months after a general election, the successful leader carries with him or her the charisma of victory. In the first year, most marriages are happy. It takes no special skill to succeed in good times.

But then the climate changes. Eventually it always does. That is when many businesses, and

politicians, and marriages fail. There are times when even the greatest people stumble. At such moments, character is tested. The great human beings are not those who never fail. They are those who survive failure, who keep on going, who refuse to be defeated, who never give up or give in. They keep trying. They learn from every mistake. They treat failure as a learning experience. And from every refusal to be defeated, they become stronger, wiser and more determined. That is the story of Moses' life in both parshat Shemot and parshat Vaera.

Jim Collins, one of the great writers on leadership, puts it well:

The signature of the truly great versus the merely successful is not the absence of difficulty, but the ability to come back from setbacks, even cataclysmic catastrophes, stronger than before ...The path out of darkness begins with those exasperatingly persistent individuals who are constitutionally incapable of capitulation. It's one thing to suffer a staggering defeat...and entirely another to give up on the values and aspirations that make the protracted struggle worthwhile. Failure is not so much a physical state as a state of mind; success is falling down, and getting up one more time, without end.¹

Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner once wrote a powerful letter to a disciple who had become discouraged by his repeated failure to master Talmudic learning:

A failing many of us suffer is that when we focus on the high attainments of great people, we discuss how they are complete in this or that area, while omitting mention of the inner struggles that had previously raged within them. A listener would get the impression that these individuals sprang from the hand of their creator in a state of perfection . . .

The result of this feeling is that when an ambitious young man of spirit and enthusiasm meets obstacles, falls and slumps, he imagines himself as unworthy of being “planted in the house of God”(Ps. 92:13)...

Know, however, my dear friend, that your soul is rooted not in the tranquillity of the good inclination, but in the battle of the good inclination...The English expression, “Lose a battle and win the war,” applies. Certainly you have stumbled and will stumble again, and in many battles you will fall lame. I promise you, though, that after those losing campaigns you will emerge from the war with laurels of victory on your head...The wisest of men said, “A righteous man falls seven times, but rises again.” (Proverbs 24:16) Fools believe the intent of the verse is to teach us that the righteous man falls seven times and, despite this, he rises. But the knowledgeable are aware that the essence of the righteous man’s rising again is *because of* his seven falls.²

Rabbi Hutner’s point is that *greatness cannot be achieved without failure*. There are heights you cannot climb without first having fallen.

For many years, I kept on my desk a quote from Calvin Coolidge, sent by a friend who knew how easy it is to be discouraged. It said:

“Nothing in this world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent.”

I would only add, “And seyata diShmaya, the help of Heaven.” God never loses faith in us even if we sometimes lose faith in ourselves.

The supreme role model is Moses who, despite all the setbacks chronicled in last week’s parsha and this week’s, eventually became the man of whom it was said that he was “a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his energy unabated.” (Deut. 34:7)

Defeats, delays and disappointments hurt. They hurt even for Moses. So if there are times when we, too, feel discouraged and demoralised, it is important to remember that even the greatest people failed. What made them great is that they kept going. The road to success passes through many valleys of failure. There is no other way.

QUESTIONS

1. What kind of responses to failure does Rabbi Sacks encourage?
2. “God never loses faith in us” – could this idea help you to believe in yourself?
3. Does it inspire you to think about how even the people who have achieved great success have also suffered great disappointments, rejections and defeats?

NOTES

1. Jim Collins, *How the Mighty Fall: And Why Some Companies Never Give In* (New York, Harper Collins, 2009), 123.
2. Rabbi Yitzhak Hutner, *Sefer Pachad Yitzchak: Iggerot u-Ketavim* (Gur Aryeh, 1981), no. 128, 217-18.



Frogs

(God sends a message to Pharaoh to release His people. The message is ridiculed and rejected. God then tells Moshe of the plan to strike Egypt with blood, and the plagues begin. While the transformation of water to blood should have been intimidating, when the magicians of Egypt manage to replicate this on a small scale (ironically bringing even more blood to Egypt), Pharaoh is invigorated and once again refuses to comply. This sets the stage for the second plague.

And God said to Moshe, 'Go to Pharaoh, and say to him, Thus said the Lord, Let my people go, that they may serve me. And if you refuse to let them go, behold, I will plague all your borders with frogs. And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into your house, and into your bed chamber, and upon your bed, and into the house of your servants, and upon your people, and into your ovens, and into your kneading troughs. And the frogs shall come up both on you, and upon your people, and upon all your servants. And God said to Moshe, Say to Aharon, Stretch forth your hand with your rod over the streams, over the rivers, and over the ponds, and cause frogs to come up upon the land of Egypt. And Aharon stretched out his hand over the waters of Egypt; and the frog(s) came up, and covered the land of Egypt. (Sh'mot 7:26-8:2)

It is difficult to discern subtleties of language in translation, but there is an oddity which is striking in Hebrew: In the prologue to the plague, the amphibious creature is called *tzfarde'im* (frogs) in the plural, while in verse 2, when Aharon stretches out his hand, the text reads *tzfarde'a* (frog) in the singular.

Rashi offers two interpretations to reconcile the usage of both the singular and the plural. In the first interpretation, Rashi explains that both terms are accurate: In fact, only one frog emerged from the water (clearly an enormous frog, as it covered all of Egypt). This one frog was then hit repeatedly, but rather than dying of its wounds or

beating a retreat, it multiplied or reproduced spontaneously, "streaming forth swarms and swarms of frogs". Rashi admits that this is a Midrashic explanation, and then offers a second interpretation based on the straightforward, more literal meaning of the text. He theorizes that it is linguistically acceptable to use the singular form when referring to the plural of certain species of animals, as in the case of "fish" or "sheep" in English.¹ While this second explanation is rational and logical, it suffers from one major weakness: If the singular form of frog denotes the plural, why was the plural form used in the preceding verses? This problem seems to have been the reason Rashi offered the alternative, Midrashic interpretation as well.

The Midrashic source for Rashi's interpretation is itself comprised of two opinions, but with a very important shift:

AND THE FROG(S) CAME UP,
 AND COVERED THE LAND OF
 EGYPT. Rabbi Akiva said: It was
 only one frog, but this bred so rapidly
 that it filled the land of Egypt. Rabbi
 Elazar Ben Azariah said to him:
 'Akiva! What business have you with
 Haggadah? Leave homiletical
 interpretations and turn to Neg'aim
 and Ohalot! Indeed, there was one
 frog at first, but it croaked to the
 others and they came.' (Midrash
 Rabba Sh'mot 10:4)

If we were expecting a debate between a rationalist and a metaphysician, we would be sorely disappointed, even though it sounded promising at first: Rabbi Akiva opines that there

was but one frog, and via spontaneous reproduction, the frog spread throughout Egypt. When Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya chastises Rabbi Akiva, saying "What business have you with Haggadah?", one would think that the object of his ire was Akiva's fantastic interpretation. Indeed, the advice he gives Rabbi Akiva, to redirect his intellectual efforts to matters of clear-cut halachic inquiry, seems wholly understandable. But then, Rabbi Elazar offers his own approach, and it seems quite similar to that of Rabbi Akiva: there was one frog - but it called its friends in to help. It is very hard for us to see the superiority of this second approach, and why Akiva was encouraged to abandon this type of study. At first, we think we know where the argument between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya is going, but Rabbi Elazar's final statement, the "bottom line" of his argument, casts the earlier rebuke in a new light, making what we thought was clear seem mystifying. In stark distinction to the two opinions cited by Rashi, here the distinction seems to be less a divergence between rationalism and metaphysics and more a matter of degrees. What, then, could the reason for Rabbi Elazar's rebuke have been, given that his own analysis of the text is not radically different from the interpretation he rejects?

The Hassidic masters offer an overall view of the plagues that may help us to understand the argument between Rabbi Elazar and Rabbi Akiva, as well as giving us insight into the plague of frogs in general and to our grammatical query in particular.

Rebbi Kalonymus Kalman Epstein (1754-1823) (in his *Maor Vashemesh*) explains our particular

problem in the context of his larger understanding of the plagues. According to the mystical tradition he received from his masters,² the purpose of the plagues was to establish the truth of God's existence on Earth: Had God so desired, He could have simply and effortlessly removed the Israelites from Egypt. Apparently, there is great theological purpose to the plagues.

In this mystical tradition, the Ten Plagues are parallel to the ten kabbalistic *Sefirot*, in reverse sequence. The first plague, blood, was parallel to *Malchut*, Kingship: God is King of the Universe. The Egyptians believed that the Nile was the life force of Egypt, and the Nile was in turn created by Pharaoh.³ Therefore, turning their beloved Nile to blood was a direct attack on the beliefs and superstitions of the Egyptians, a means of making God's mastery of the physical universe apparent.⁴

Following this line of thought, the next plague, frogs, would counter the next *Sefira* - *Yesod*. This is the spiritual power that connects the higher world with the lower world - heaven and earth. Rebbi Nachman of Breslov (1772 -1810), and Rebbi Kalonymus Kalman, both building upon a tradition found in the Tana D'beh Eliyahu and the writings of the Arizal⁵ as transmitted by the Baal Shem Tov,⁶ note that the word frog, *tzfarde'a*, can have more than one meaning, especially when we de-construct it into its two elemental words.⁷ The word *tzfarde'a* (frog) is a combination derived of *tzipor* (bird) and *de'a* (knowledge).⁸ Thus, a "frog" is a "knowledgeable bird", turning the

tzfarde'a from an amphibian into a flying creature that could reach up to the heavens.⁹

Rebbi Nachman actually takes this same tradition in a slightly different direction. Birds possess two unique abilities: flight and song. While we have seen that the ability to fly is germane to the spiritual identification of this plague with the *Sefira Yesod*, connecting heaven and earth, Rebbi Nachman focuses on the bird's other unique attribute - its ability to sing.¹⁰ What may sound to some as the croaking of a frog may be perceived as the beautiful song of a bird. Indeed, the "beautiful singing" of the frog silenced the Psalmist, King David himself. The Midrash recounts that when David completed the Book of Psalms, he experienced momentary pride and asked God, "Is there anything in this world that sings songs as beautiful as these to You?" God brought forth a frog, to teach David that the song of the frog surpasses David's Psalms.¹¹

Aside from the Hassidic tradition, rabbinic sources have quite a lot to say about what might otherwise have been considered one of the lowliest of creatures. Apparently, its' beautiful song is not the frog's only claim to fame; according to rabbinic sources, the frogs of Egypt served as inspiration for others in the future who would face perilous situations with heroism and bravery.

When the Torah describes the plague of frogs, the scope of the infestation is very precisely detailed: "And the river shall bring forth frogs abundantly, which shall go up and come into your house, and into your bed chamber, and upon your bed, and into the house of your servants, and upon your

people, and into your ovens, and into your kneading troughs." Of all the points of infiltration, the oven is clearly not the most innocuous - from the perspective of the frog. Entering a hot oven can be unpleasant at least, excruciating and fatal at worst. Yet God commanded that the ovens be filled with frogs, and the frogs complied and entered the hot ovens, along with or instead of the kneaded dough:

AND INTO YOUR KNEADING-TROUGHES...Now when does the dough begin to cling to the oven? When one heats the oven. Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah reasoned from the case of the frogs when they descended into the fiery furnace. (Midrash Rabbah Shmot 10:2)

Generations later, when faced with a situation of martyrdom, Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah take their cue -- not from Avraham who was thrown into Nimrod's furnace, but from the frogs who jumped into the hot ovens of Egypt because God said they must.

The author of this teaching is a man named Todos of Rome, who apparently was a leader of the community and was considered a great man by the scholars of the Talmud.

The scholars asked: Was Todos of Rome a great man or a powerful man? - Come and hear: This too did Todos of Rome teach: What [reason] did Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah see that they delivered themselves, for the sanctification of the [Divine] Name, to the fiery furnace? **They argued a *minori* to themselves: if frogs, which are not commanded concerning the**

sanctification of the [Divine] Name, yet it is written of them, 'and they shall come up and go into your house . . . and into your ovens, and into your kneading troughs': when are the kneading troughs to be found near the oven? When the oven is hot. **We, who are commanded concerning the sanctification of the Name, how much the more so.** (Talmud Bavli Pesachim 53b)

Todos explains the precedent set by the frogs: Though they were not halachically obligated to do so, they chose martyrdom to sanctify God's name. It stands to reason, then, that those who are halachically obligated should do no less. In another source the matter is explained with sensitivity to nuance: The frogs had no ancestral merit upon which to rely for salvation, yet they nonetheless chose to endanger themselves; we, who rely on the merit of our forefathers, cannot but endanger ourselves likewise, with the hope that our ancestral merit will save us.¹²

The question of martyrdom is a very complex issue in Jewish law: When is the ultimate self-sacrifice an obligation, and when is it a subject of choice? This very issue is the enduring lesson of the frogs, who were not absolutely obligated to martyr themselves, yet nonetheless knowingly made the ultimate sacrifice.

Keeping this philosophical debate in mind, we now turn to another discussion between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar Ben Azarya. In a celebrated passage found in the Passover Haggada we find these two rabbis, along with several of the

most important Jewish leaders of that age, having their Seder together:

It once happened that Rabbi Eliezer, Rabbi Yehoshua, Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya, Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Tarfon were reclining (during the Passover Seder) in Bnei Braq and they were engaged in the story of the Exodus through that entire night, until their students came and said, "Rabbis, it is time for the morning *Shma*".

Why did these Rabbis abandon normative Jewish practice and eschew their obligations to educate their own children and families at their respective Seders, and instead spend this holy night with colleagues? This particular passage has been preserved only in the Passover Haggadah, the primary source lost. However, extant parallel sources are instructive. The Tosefta records a similar Seder:

It once happened that Raban Gamliel and the sages reclined (during the Passover Seder) in the home of Bitus the son of Zunin in Lod and they were involved in the study of the laws of the Pesach all night until the rooster crowed. They then knew it was time to go to the study hall. (Tosefta Pesachim, Chapter 10)

In this instance, a number of Torah scholars gather, this time in Lod. The only protagonist mentioned by name is Raban Gamliel, who was absent in the Haggadah version. This particular account shares certain elements with other Passover evenings celebrated in Lod, with some

more familiar celebrants, as related in various other sources:

Rabbi Tarfon and the Elders were once reclining in the upper storey of Nithza's house, in Lod, when this question was raised before them: Is study greater, or practice? Rabbi Tarfon answered: Practice is greater. R. Akiva answered: Study is greater. Then they all answered and said: Study is greater, for study leads to action. (Talmud Bavli Kiddushin 40b)

Here, too, the location is Lod, but the particular venue is an attic. The question posed to this lofty forum sounds somewhat academic: What is more important, learning or action? Theory or reality? Again, why are the sages discussing this on Pesach night?¹³ Why are they together and not with their families? Why are they sitting in an attic? This particular attic is known from another passage, where a major policy issue is discussed: When should martyrdom be undertaken?

R. Yohanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yehozadak: By a majority vote, it was resolved in the attic of the house of Nithza in Lod that in every [other] law of the Torah, if a man is commanded: 'Transgress and suffer not death' he may transgress and not suffer death, excepting idolatry, incest, [which includes adultery] and murder. (Sanhedrin 74a)

It is the same attic, but now it is obvious that the question posed is a life and death question. When is a Jew obligated to give up his or her life? When is martyrdom a requirement? This question was

discussed, debated and voted upon in an attic in Lod. Why not out in the open? Why was the debate and discourse not public, in the normal venues for Talmudic study? When we consider the time and place this discussion took place we begin to realize that this was not a question of theory, it was a question of practice. The ruthless Romans had imposed decree after decree. Eventually the very study of Torah was outlawed. "Where do we draw the line?", the gathered Sages ask. When is a person obligated to fight? When is a person obligated to surrender? When is it permissible to knowingly put oneself in a situation that is undoubtedly dangerous? Tragically, in that generation, these questions became commonplace. The Rabbis had to discuss, debate and vote, but the discussion could not be public--not when a rebellion was either in the air or already underway.

Life had changed. Things had become complicated. Meetings were held in secret, and the decisions shared covertly. The Rabbis apparently looked for the best time to hold such discussions, and chose a window of holiness, a night that was blessed and empowered with the ability to safeguard Jews from peril. They chose the night that redemption - both past and future- is the main topic of discussion: Pesach. They, too, were discussing redemption, looking to the past redemption and taking cues for the future redemption.¹⁴ Our Pesach tradition includes a call to empathy and identification: In each and every generation, the Jew is commanded to insert him or her self into the story of our national redemption, to attempt to visualize and thereby take part in the stages of slavery and freedom our

forefathers experienced in Egypt.¹⁵ When these Rabbis gathered together, they surely felt and understood that historic slavery and the archetypical liberation. Even more pointedly, they dealt with the pain of their own current affliction, and undoubtedly tried to envision, to sense, even to hasten the future redemption. Unfortunately, the path to future redemption was paved with resistance and martyrdom. And so, while it would have been nice to enjoy a pleasant holiday feast with family, the future of the nation hinged upon the life and death decisions reached that holy night in the attic in Lod.

When discussing martyrdom, the rabbis concluded that there are times when one is required to give one's life. The proof-text invariably brought for this ruling is the verse which commands us to love God with all our soul:

For it has been taught, R. Eliezer said:
 And you shall love the Lord your God
 with all your heart and with all your
 soul, and with all your resources.
 Since 'with all your soul' is stated,
 why is 'with all your resources' stated?
 Or if 'with all your resources' be
 written, why also write 'with all your
 soul'? For the man to whom life is
 more precious than wealth, 'with all
 your soul' is written; while he to
 whom wealth is more precious than
 life is bidden, 'with all your resources'
 [i.e., substance]. (Sanhedrin 74a)

This verse is found in the prayer called *Shma*. Perhaps, in the story transmitted in our Pesach Haggadah, this is the meaning of the passage

"until the students came and said "Rabbis, it is time for the morning *Shma*"! This story took place in Bnei Braq, Rabbi Akiva's hometown; these were his students.¹⁶ What these students seem to be saying is, "Rabbis, it is time for the morning *Shma* - it is time to love God with all our hearts, with all our souls, with all we have, even our lives. It is time for martyrdom." And so it was: When the time came for Rabbi Akiva to be martyred, the *Shma* was on his lips, for the Talmud explains that it was, indeed, "time for *Shma*:"

When Rabbi Akiva was taken out for execution, it was the hour for the recital of the *Shma*, and while they combed his flesh with iron combs, he was accepting upon himself the Kingship of Heaven. His students said to him: Our teacher, even to this point? He said to them: All my days I have been troubled by this verse, 'with all your soul', [which I interpret,] 'even if He takes your soul'.¹⁷ I said: When shall I have the opportunity of fulfilling this? Now that I have the opportunity shall I not fulfill it? He prolonged the word *ehad* until he expired while saying it. A *bat kol* (heavenly voice) went forth and proclaimed: Fortunate are you, Akiva, that your soul has departed with the word *ehad*! The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Such Torah, and such a reward? [He should have been] among them that die by Your hand, O Lord.' He replied to them: 'Their portion is in life.' A *bat kol* went forth and proclaimed, 'Fortunate are you, Rabbi

Akiva, that you are destined for the life of the World to Come. (Talmud Bavli Brachot 61b)

Rabbi Akiva was martyred because he did not desist from teaching Torah when the Romans declared it illegal.¹⁸ Is this "crime" one of the three cases which would halachically require martyrdom? Was his case an obligation of martyrdom, or was it heroism? When the primary historian of the Talmudic age, Rav Sherira Gaon, describes the death of Rabbi Akiva, he writes, "Rabbi Akiva gave himself up to be killed."¹⁹ This sounds decidedly voluntary and not obligatory.²⁰

Perhaps we can complete the circle, returning to the strange debate between Rabbi Akiva and Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya regarding the singular or plural form of "frog".²¹ Rabbi Akiva, whom the Talmud says also lacked ancestral merit,²² spoke of one big frog, a frog who was tortured and beaten.²³ Somehow, rather than killing this one frog, the Egyptians' abuse caused countless frogs to appear, making life unbearable for the Egyptians, and eventually resulting in the redemption of the Jewish slaves. Thus, Rabbi Akiva: despite the decrees, the beatings and imprisonment, in the face of torture, he did not succumb. His words of Torah only gathered force, creating a great wave of Jewish identity and awareness, and creating the foundations of a Jewish renaissance. Many more students appeared, "swarms" of followers, inspired both by the life and death of Rabbi Akiva.

Is Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya's admonishment actually a plea to his colleague Akiva: - "Go back to Ohalot - go back to the tents"? Is this a veiled reference to Rabbi Akiva's decision to teach publicly despite the danger?

Our Rabbis taught: Once the wicked Government issued a decree forbidding the Jews to study and practice the Torah. Pappus ben Yehuda came and found Rabbi Akiva publicly bringing gatherings together and occupying himself with the Torah. He said to him: Akiva, are you not afraid of the Government? He replied: I will explain to you with a parable. A fox was once walking alongside of a river, and he saw fishes going in swarms from one place to another. He said to them: From what are you fleeing? They replied: From the nets cast for us by men. He said to them: Would you like to come up on to the dry land so that you and I can live together in the way that my ancestors lived with your ancestors? They replied: Are you the one that they call the cleverest of animals? You are not clever but foolish. If we are afraid in the element in which we live, how much more in the element in which we would die! So it is with us. If such is our condition when we sit and study the Torah, of which it is written, 'For that is your life and the length of your days,' if we go and neglect it how much worse off we shall be! (Talmud Bavli Brachot 61b)

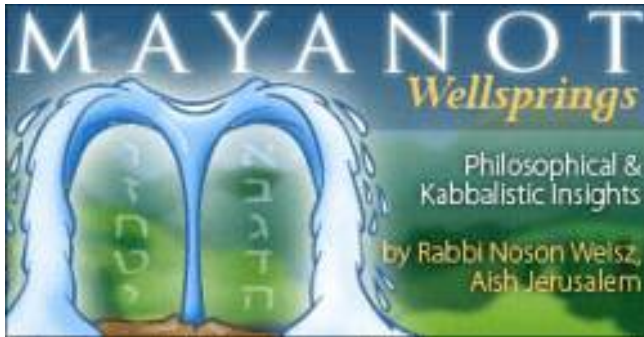
Is Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya pleading with Rabbi Akiva not to take the responsibility upon himself?

"It was one frog, but he croaked and called the others!" Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya felt that the role of a leader is to call out to others, to build the philosophical underpinnings for the movement. Rabbi Akiva was not satisfied with this role. He adopted the conclusion of his colleagues: "What is most important, study or practice? Study that leads to practice." Study is great, theory is important, philosophy is necessary, but it must eventually lead to practice. There is a time to theorize, a time to debate and cast votes, and there is a time to act, to carry one's convictions through to reality.

We noted earlier that the frog, the "knowledgeable bird", can fly, like a soul that soars to heaven. This frog/bird can also sing. What is the song that it sings? According to the Perek Shira,²⁴ the song of the frog is "*Baruch Shem K'vod Malchuto L'Olam Va'ed*": May the glorious Name of God's Kingship be blessed forever and ever.²⁵ This line appears in our twice-daily prayers between the first sentence of *Shma*, which declares God's Singularity, and the first paragraph which states the obligation to love God with all ones heart, soul, and resources, even unto death. Like Rabbi Akiva, the "frog" seems to know the secret of the *Shma*. Like Rabbi Akiva, the frog is particularly in tune with its internal voice, and is uniquely able to distinguish between night and day: This frog knows when it is time for the *Shma* to be recited, when it is time to sanctify God's name with words and actions.²⁶ As it marches into the ovens, the frog is not a frog; it is a bird. It can fly to the highest part of heaven, like a purified human soul, and sing like the greatest of our psalmists, David son of Yishai. It can say the

Shma and *Baruch Shem* like Rabbi Akiva, and teach us about martyrdom and redemption.

1. Rashi Shmot 8:2.
2. See Zohar Shmot 29a: Then followed the frogs, who with mighty squealings and croakings entered the very entrails of the Egyptians. They emerged from the river on to the dry land, where they raised a noise all around until they fell dead in the interior of the houses. Esoterically speaking, the ten plagues were wrought by the mighty hand of the Almighty, by the hand that overpowered the grades (Page 29b) of the Egyptian divinities, and confused their minds so that they remained helpless. Observe that all their grades, as soon as they emerged into the open to accomplish something that could be seen by all, became powerless to do anything.
3. This idea is expressly stated in a verse in this week's haftarah, Yechezkal 29:3 3: "Speak, and say, Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I am against you, Pharoh king of Egypt, the great crocodile that lies in the midst of his streams, who has said, My river is my own, and I have made it for myself."
4. This is also related to the Ten Commandments. The first plague addresses the same philosophical tenets as the First Commandment, "I am God..." The plague of frogs parallels the Second Commandment. See also Pri Tzaddik Kuntris al HaOchel.
5. See Shaar Hapsukim Parshat Va'era.
6. Baal Shem Tov on the Torah, Parshat Va'era: The earliest sources would appear to be the Sefer Hapliah, and the Tana D'Beh Eliyahu Chapter 7.
7. The earliest sources would appear to be the Sefer Hapliah, and the Tana D'Beh Eliyahu Chapter 7.
8. The Maharil (Minhagim Liqutim section 95), also divides the word into two tzafra and deah, but in his understanding tzafra is Aramaic for 'morning'. Hence the frog makes noise all night, but knows when the morning has come.
9. Ma'or Vashemesh Va'era.
10. Liquty Maharan Mehdura kama siman 3.
11. Perek Shira, and Yalkut Shimoni Psalms 150 section 889. This final section speaks about song. Ironically the previous section discusses the soul, and its desire to fly and leave the body and return to heaven. Again we see the same elements; singing and flying.
12. Midrash Tehilim chapter 28.
13. Admittedly the term mesubim does not necessarily mean that it was Passover; however there is certainly a common theme among these passages.
14. Others have pointed out the possibility that Rabbi Akiva and the sages were discussing the Bar Kochva rebellion. As far as I can tell, this suggestion was not raised prior to the 20th century. Of particular interest is the Pesach night celebrated in the Warsaw Ghetto immediately before the uprising. Apparently, they too discussed past and future liberation, with very practical consequences. The earliest source I located was Rabbi Y.L. Maimon. See Amram Kehati's article on the Bnei Brak Seder and its connection with the planning of the outbreak of Rabbi Akiva's revolt in Sulam Vol. 6 No. 12, Nisan 1955, pgs. 6-7.
15. Mishna Pesachim 10:5.
16. It is important to note that Rabbi Akiva was an enthusiastic supporter of Bar Kochva. See my Book "Emanations" for fuller treatment of this topic.
17. The Noam Elimelech on Parshat Chukat states that throughout Rabbi Akiva's entire life he sought to teach the lesson of sanctifying God's name and martyrdom.
18. Earlier in the passage (Brachot 61b) which describes Rabbi Akiva's death this point is made clearly. See below.
19. Letter of Rav Sherirah Gaon, Levin edition page 13, both recensions.
20. Whether one is permitted to martyr oneself when not obligated is a subject of Halachic debate. See Shulchan Oruch Yore De'ah section 156 and the various opinions of the Rambam who does not allow this, and Rabbenu Yeruchum who does. One commentator proposed that this may be the lesson Todus extrapolated from the frogs. See Yismach Moshe Parshat Ki Tisa, page 188.
21. The name Azarya adds irony to the situation, Azarya being one of the people who based on the frogs precedent decided to jump into the furnace.
22. Talmud Brachot 27b, this is the reason Rabbi Akiva was passed over for the role of Nasi, a position filled instead by Rabbi Eleazar ben Azarya. Rabban Gamaliel remained sitting and expounding and R. Joshua remained standing, until all the people there began to shout and say to Huzpith the Turgeman, Stop! and he stopped. They then said: How long is he [Rabban Gamaliel] to go on insulting him [R. Joshua]? On New Year last year he insulted him; he insulted him in the matter of the firstborn in the affair of R. Zadok; now he insults him again! Come, let us depose him! Whom shall we appoint instead? We can hardly appoint R. Joshua, because he is one of the parties involved. We can hardly appoint R. Akiba because perhaps Rabban Gamaliel will bring a curse on him because he has no ancestral merit. Let us then appoint R. Eleazar b. Azariah, who is wise and rich and the tenth in descent from Ezra. He is wise, so that if anyone puts a question to him he will be able to answer it. He is rich, so that if occasion arises for paying court to Caesar he will be able to do so. He is tenth in descent from Ezra, so that he has ancestral merit and he [Rabban Gamaliel] cannot bring a curse on him.
23. Rabbi Akiva's comment, that as the frog was tortured it multiplied, is reminiscent of the Torah text regarding the Jewish People themselves: "But the more [the Egyptians] oppressed them, the more [the Israelites] proliferated and spread." (Shmot 1:12) This certainly strengthens the identification between the frog and the Jewish people, and reveals Rabbi Akiva's encrypted message.
24. Chapter 4. This poetic work is traditionally ascribed to King David.
25. See R' Simcha Bunim of Peshischa, Kol Mevaser, part 2 Bava Kamma.
26. See footnote 8, above.)



My Country Right or Wrong

Almost everyone associates the Exodus story with Moses' famous line, *"Let my people go!"* Actually, one of the most perplexing aspects of the Exodus story concerns the words that Moses failed to utter – words that certainly should have been part of this line.

Moses never told Pharaoh that the Jews were not planning to return to Egypt following their three-day jaunt into the desert *"to offer sacrifices to God."* He never said, *"Let my people go for good."*

Surely this was misleading; taking Moses' words at face value would certainly encourage the listener to form the impression that all that was being sought was a short holiday for the slaves; a temporary release from bondage.

It is true that Moses never specifically promised that the Jews would return, but he also never absolutely declared that they would not. The possibility of Israel's return seems to have been deliberately left open as an option. Why?

Expectation of Return

Pharaoh's reaction to Moses' request is even more perplexing. It is clear that Pharaoh expected the

Jews to return. Rashi expounds on this cryptic line:

"It was told to the king of Egypt that they had fled." (Exodus 14:5)

Pharaoh had sent spies to accompany the Jews and see what they would do at the end of three days. The spies returned and reported that the Jews had no intention of coming back to slavery. Upon hearing this, the attitude of Pharaoh and his courtiers changed and they regretted having freed the Jews. (Rashi)

As he truly expected the Jews to return, why did Pharaoh put Egypt through the travail of the plagues rather than allow them to have their short religious holiday? They were only requesting a holiday; the passage shows that he was fully confident of his ability to force them to return at the end of the three-day period if necessary. How can we explain his stubborn refusal to consent? Judging by the archeological evidence, religious holidays were quite commonplace in Egypt; how harmful could it be to add one more, albeit a Jewish one?

Didn't God Harden His Heart?

It would be tempting to avoid the problem altogether and declare that Pharaoh's opposition was irrational by definition; after all, doesn't the Torah itself tell us that God hardened Pharaoh's heart? But this response is unacceptable for more than one reason. God only hardened Pharaoh's heart after the sixth plague. (See Exodus 9:12.) Until then Pharaoh refused to grant this short

holiday all on his own, without any outside prompting from anyone.

What is more, the consensus of opinion among the commentators is that even the eventual hardening of Pharaoh's heart implied nothing more than giving him the courage of his convictions. Our tendency as human beings is to buckle under the pressure of a superior force even when we think the wielder of the force is in the wrong. It was to this human weakness that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was addressed. God gave Pharaoh the courage of his convictions; he had the fortitude to endure the punishment of the plagues as long as he felt that he was in the right. (See Sforno, Exodus 4:21-23.) We must therefore seek to find the rationale behind his position. What made him think he was in the right? Does the answer have any bearing on why Moses never stated that the Jews were leaving for good?

Human-Divine Relationships

To understand Pharaoh's perspective on the matter, we first have to examine the general framework in which human relationships with God take place.

One of the hallmarks of a modern democracy is the insistence on the separation of church and state. At first glance neither the church nor the state are harmed by this separation. But in fact this is not so; the separation is based on an arbitrary assumption that turns out to be inaccurate upon examination.

The policy of separation assumes that God establishes relations with individual human beings rather than with nations and peoples. If

this assumption were true then the separation would be wonderful and could bring nothing but good. The human-Divine relationship follows the individual conscience in any case, and keeping theological disputes out of the social arena certainly promotes social harmony.

Unfortunately, this assumption turns out to be unwarranted and runs counter to the teachings of the Torah:

R' Shimon said: God summoned the seventy angels who surround His throne and said to them, 'Come, let us scramble their language and divide them into seventy tongues and seventy peoples and then let us cast lots over who is to get which one ... ' And God's lot fell on Abraham and his children, as it is written (in Deuteronomy 32:8): *"For God's portion is His people; Jacob is the measure of His inheritance."* God declared, 'The measure and the lot that fell to Me is exactly the one I desired.' As it is written (in Psalms 16:1): *"Pleasant is the lot that fell my way."* (Yalkut Shimoni, Noah 247:62)

Nachmanides explains at great length that this is the significance of Jews being the "chosen people." God appointed an angel to rule over each of the seventy nations, but He kept Israel as His own portion and rules over it directly.

It would appear that God relates to individuals – Jews and non-Jews alike – as members of their respective nations. Each person has his position within the group, and it is in the context of his position within his particular group that he must relate to God.

Slicing the Individual Morally

The separation of church and state practiced by modern societies has another unacceptable consequence from a Torah perspective. Such a separation inevitably leads to moral relativism in the assessment of individuals due to the policy of subdividing people's lives into their functional and personal aspects. For example, we evaluate the president of General Motors amorally in terms of his office; the criterion of judgment is competence, not goodness. The way he treats his wife and his kids or how he addresses his mother has no bearing on his job performance. He can be an excellent president even if he isn't a very 'good' person.

In a society that has separated the church from the state, you cannot base the assignment of public positions even partially on spiritual merit. Amoral standards based on pure functional competence are applied even to political leaders. Generally speaking, our credo is that a person's private life is his own business. The fact that President Clinton survived his term of office shows just how widespread this feeling has become.

It should surprise no one that the Torah takes a dim view of such moral relativism. The Torah teaches us that God relates to each person in terms of his level of spirituality in all aspects of life. It is true that He is also generally prepared to overlook the moral flaws of the President of General Motors, but this is due to the fact that each person's spiritual niche is determined by the position he or she occupies within society and the position of the President of General Motors is relatively unimportant in spiritual terms. A

teacher, for example, is held up to a much higher moral standard, and political leaders who are charged with the preservation of our social values to a higher one still.

The spiritual power of a society is the sum total of the spiritual power of its individual members combined; the more effectively these individual spiritual potentials are blended together, the greater the unified power. The rules that govern spiritual might exactly parallel those that govern economic might. To maximize their economic potential, societies rely on the mechanism of the free market to blend the economic potentials of all their members as efficiently as possible. To efficiently combine all the disparate spiritual potentials into a single whole requires a spiritual mechanism that duplicates the effectiveness of the free market in the spiritual realm. The institution of monarchy was the mechanism invented to fill this function.

Divine Right of Kings

We regard the theory of the "Divine Right of Kings" as an outmoded primitive idea that the world is fortunate to be rid of. The belief in this principle bred cruel tyrants who oppressed the populace at their whim on the grounds that whatever they did was sanctioned by the authority vested in them by God.

However, the fact that it has been historically abused does not invalidate the idea itself; in fact, the principle of royalty flows logically from the paradigm of the human-Divine relationship as we have explained it. If a nation is to establish a face-to-face relationship with God, it must first create a human focal point that symbolically represents

it. The nation does this by selecting an individual to serve as the microcosm of the entire nation rolled into a single human consciousness, who becomes his nation personified. The personality of the monarch is the nation's human interface with God. It is through his personality that the nation expresses its needs to God, and it is through him that the Divine energy flows from God to the nation.

Of course, it would make no difference whether such a "king" was elected or chosen on the grounds of ancestry. The point is that the creation of kings is born out of the need to create a mechanism that combines the spiritual potentials of the entire populace in a harmonious way by providing a human interface that represents them all. Kings are a spiritual phenomenon. A corporate body will not serve the same purpose; such a body has no human voice. Corporate bodies are capable of making decisions, but they have no talent for spontaneous communication. Prayer must come from the heart.

The Pharaoh's Position

At this point, we can begin to comprehend Pharaoh's opposition to the creation of a Jewish religious holiday.

God demanded repeatedly that Pharaoh send out the Jews – "My people" – so that they might serve Him. From Pharaoh's standpoint, if the Jews conducted their own dialogue with God, they existed as a separate nation regardless of whether they remained in Egypt or left it.

As God relates to human beings as members of their national group rather than as individuals, the

Jews could only establish their own separate relationship with God by becoming a distinct nation. As long as they remained an offshoot of the Egyptian nation, the way Pharaoh regarded them, they would naturally relate to God through Pharaoh, the Egyptian king. He was their interface with God.

Question of Attitude

The Sages present us with two sharply differing attitudes about the proper approach to man's relationship with God. [See Bereishis Rabba 89 and Mechilta, Yisro 6.] All religious societies take it as axiomatic that God created the world to express His attribute of benevolence. But this axiom can lead one to sharply contrasting conclusions about the way we interface with God.

1. Pharaoh's approach to the human-Divine relationship is based on the assumption that God needs man as much as man needs God. If it is axiomatic that God created the world because He needed to express His attribute of benevolence, then it follows that by serving as the recipient of this benevolence, man offers God a valuable service. According to this view God received a fair return for the bounty He showered on Egypt. In the interface between man and God, the parties face each other as equals. Man owes God honor, not service. He provides the service by providing an outlet for God's benevolence. And the Egyptians certainly knew how to honor their gods. The enormous resources the Egyptian people devoted to paying proper tribute to their

deities are still very much in evidence. God not only received an outlet for practicing His benevolence, He was also honored for it.

2. In contrast, the Jewish attitude to the human-Divine relationship is that God's benevolence finds its most sublime expression in the opportunity it provides man to serve and obey God. If he takes advantage of this opportunity man can connect with God and actually become one with the Divine. Such unity with God is the true goal of all existence. There is no greater bounty available to be had in the universe than this unity. As the aim of existence is to be one with God, the human relationship with God must be founded on service rather than honor. We do not interface with God as equals. Our goal is to attain perfection by attaching ourselves to Him and attaining a state of unity with His perfection. Honoring God for the things He bestows on man emphasizes the gulf that separates them and serves to establish duality rather than unity.

The world itself is not God's ultimate gift to man; the opportunity to work on connecting oneself to Him that life in this world offers is the true expression of Divine benevolence. It is only in this world that we enjoy the benefit of the power of free will that allows us to voluntarily accept God as our ruler.

In Pharaoh's view there are two rulers facing each other as equals; in the Torah view there is only one ruler, God.

Israel as Part of Egypt

Had Pharaoh accepted the formation of a separate Jewish nation gracefully in the name of the Egyptian people, he would have placed his people in the enviable position of having done God an enormously valuable service, for which He would have been eternally grateful. The sojourn in Egypt allowed the Jewish nation to be born. The graceful acknowledgement of the birth would have given Egypt a powerful claim to share in whatever glory fell to Israel's lot throughout history. There would have been no sharp, clean break between the Jewish and the Egyptian peoples.

This culmination to the Exodus story was a distinct possibility when Moses first approached Pharaoh. Pharaoh had free will; no one could dictate his response. Consequently, Moses never stated that the Jews were departing Egypt permanently; at this point a permanent separation was far from inevitable.

But Pharaoh turned Moses down. God is God but in Egypt it is he, Pharaoh, who is king. By opening a separate track of communication with the Jews God was interfering in his domain. He, the Pharaoh, was not willing to become God's viceroy and rule Egypt in God's name, carrying out his orders. The Jews could not have their own religious holiday. They have to interface with God through Pharaoh, the Egyptian symbol of spiritual unity.

This clash of philosophies helps to explain something perplexing about human attitudes towards religion in general.

The Honor Principle

Most human beings are firm believers in the concept that there is no such thing as a "free lunch." In this world the return is always commensurate with the size of the investment. Yet, even truly religious people spend only a few hours a week at most thinking about God, or worrying about fulfilling His wishes, and still confidently expect to receive as their reward for this small investment eternal life and happiness in Paradise. How does this make sense?

The answer lies in the fact that they share Pharaoh's understanding that what God desires from them is honor rather than service. If they build a beautiful church or temple in His honor, and conduct inspiring ceremonies to pay tribute to Him, they feel that they must have fulfilled His expectations. Their service to God is the fact that they provide an outlet for His benevolence.

Jews, whose view of Paradise is the attainment of unity with God, understand that a much greater investment is required. You can only reach unity by connecting every aspect of your life to God's will, something that calls for commandments that express His will, and a lifetime of effort devoted to their observance.

Religion as National Identity

In this context, there is something else that is unique about the Jewish people.

For the non-Jew religion is secondary to national identity. His residence in a particular country renders him an integral part of the nation that inhabits it. The nations are part of the world of nature, and in the natural world, people belong to the land that supports them. The relationship with God is expressed in terms of God's help in bringing peace and prosperity to the portion of the earth that supports each nation.

It follows therefore that when an Egyptian for example leaves Egypt and is sustained by a different patch of the earth, he becomes a citizen of another nation, and must now relate to God through the nation he has decided to join, as it is his new land that will henceforth sustain him and provide him with his livelihood.

But Jews are not part of the natural world [see *Mayanot Shmot*]; our survival through 2000 years of exile amply demonstrates that we belong to no particular patch of soil. We are dependent directly on God for our survival; the world of nature does not support us. The Jew's homeland is his interface with God, his Judaism, not the physical country he happens to inhabit.

As is true for the rest of the world, God relates to the Jewish individual only in the context of his nation. But in the case of the Jew it is only his religion that defines his nation; to have a relationship with God, a Jew must have a connection with his religion. If he does not relate to his religion, he effectively has no country. What will sustain him? Certainly not the natural world!

When your religion is also your country you have a dilemma the rest of mankind does not have to

face. All people who separate from their national religion and seek out their individual paths weaken their country by reducing the intensity of its bond with God. But their country continues to exist as part of nature and it is still able to sustain them.

But Jews have no country other than their religion. When a Jew parts with his religion, part of the Jewish country ceases to exist altogether. The less religious Jews there are in the world, the smaller the bond of the Jewish nation with God. All Jews are dependent on this bond for their very existence. There is nothing else to sustain them. Jews who remain faithful to their traditions and maintain the Jewish national bond with God are directly supporting the entire Jewish people.



The Measure of Goodness

Moses' first visit to Pharaoh did not turn out exactly as he had expected. As the messenger of God, he had hoped to convince Pharaoh to release the Jewish people from bondage. But Pharaoh responded with disdain, "Moshe and Aharon, why are you making trouble? The people have work to do, and you're only getting in the way." Then Pharaoh had turned the screws of bondage even

tighter. He decreed that the people had to go out and procure their own building materials, but the quota expected of them would not be lowered.

Moshe was upset, and he said to Hashem (*Shemos* 5:22), "My Master, why have You treated these people badly? Why did You send me on this mission?"

God took exception to Moshe's questions and rebuked him. "I am Hashem. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, and they never questioned Me. I promised Avraham the entire land of Israel, yet he could not find a grave for his wife Sarah until he paid a high price for a burial ground. Did he complain? Did he question Me? I told Yitzchak to live in this land, that I would give it to him and his descendants, yet in order to find water he had to wrangle with the Philistine shepherds. Did he complain? Did he question Me? I promised Yaakov the entire land, yet he was unable to find a place to pitch his tent until he bought a place from Chamor ben Shechem for one hundred *kesitas*. Did he complain? Did he question Me? Only you had complaints, Moshe. Only you questioned Me. What a loss the patriarchs are to Me. What an irreplaceable loss!"

The patriarchs had also experienced adverse conditions. They had also had times when things did not go as well as they might have expected. But they never complained. They never questioned Hashem. Moshe did, and Hashem rebuked him for it.

If we think into it more deeply, however, it would seem that there is an important difference between Moshe and the patriarchs. They were private

citizens, so to speak, individuals who were having a hard time. True, the promises they received from Hashem involved a future nation, but at the time they experienced their hardships, there was no nation as yet. Only they themselves were affected. Therefore, the patriarchs could, in all good conscience, suffer in silence and not complain.

Moshe, however, was the leader of an entire nation, responsible for the welfare of millions of people. It was his duty to advocate for them, to fight for their welfare, to complain when things did not go well for them. Why then did Hashem rebuke him? What did he do wrong?

When the Jewish people sinned with the Golden Calf, Moshe argued for their survival, otherwise, he said, "Erase me from Your book." And Hashem did not object. When Moshe came to their defense again and again in the desert, Hashem did not object. Why did He object now?

The answer lies in Moshe's choice of words. "My Master," he said, "why have You treated these people badly?" He characterized Hashem's actions as "bad." This was his mistake. True, it was his responsibility to advocate for the Jewish people. True, it was his responsibility to complain to Hashem when things did not go well for them. But at the same time, he had to recognize that everything Hashem did was good. All he could do was ask that it become better. In his position, Moshe should have had too profound understanding of the goodness of Hashem's actions to utter the words "treated them badly."

When Pharaoh asked Yaakov how old he was, he replied (*Bereishis* 47:9), "The years of my life

have been few and bad." According to the Midrash, Hashem immediately said to Yaakov, "I saved you from Eisav and Lavan and I returned Dinah and Yosef to you, and now you are complaining that your years are few and bad? Your life will be shortened by the number of words in your complaint."

Yaakov never expressed his complaints to Hashem, but apparently deep inside he did not perceive the absolute good of everything Hashem had sent his way. Although his life may have been bitter, he should have realized that it was not bad. The confrontation with Eisav developed the Jewish people's ability to contend with Eisav's descendants in future generations. Yosef's removal to Egypt paved the way for the salvation of the nation. These were difficult, trying and even incomprehensible events, but ultimately, they were not bad. As the Chafetz Chaim points out, strong medicine may be bitter, but if it is effective, it cannot be considered bad.

This is where Moshe erred. In his great love and devotion for the Jewish people, he was distracted by their momentary affliction and lost sight of its ultimate good. For that brief moment when those fateful words slipped out, he failed to see that, in the broader scheme of things, Hashem was treating the Jewish people exceedingly well.

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