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Weekly Parsha

Bo

RABBI BERNIE FOX

**Moshe's treatment of
Paroh and the obligation to
respect monarchs and
rulers**

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Weekly Parsha

No Room *for* Doubt

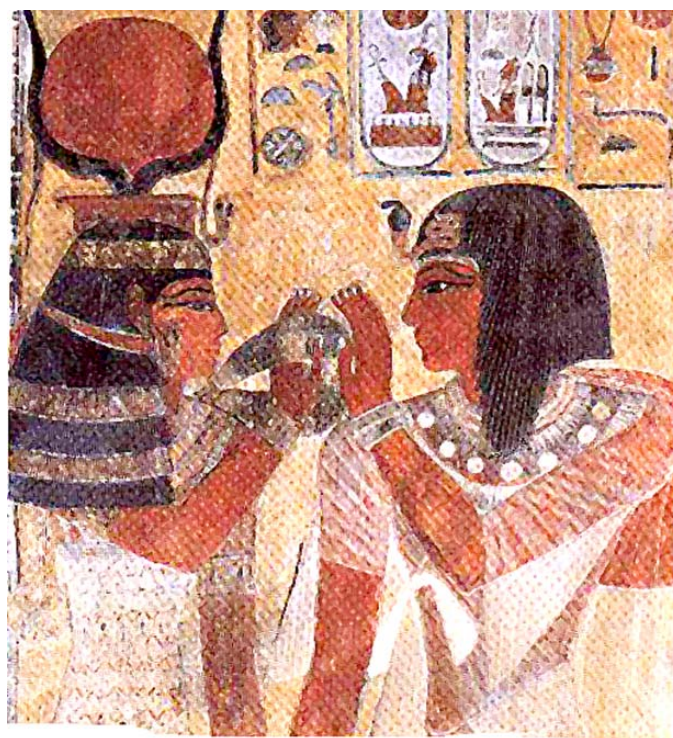
RABBI DR. DARRELL GINSBERG

In these first parshiyos of sefer Shemos, ending with next week's parshas Beshalach, we are witness to the unfolding of God's plan for Pharaoh and the Egyptians. To the layman, the acts and events, from the plagues to the splitting of the sea, seem to be Divine punishments targeting the Egyptians. But close analysis, along with the assistance of the commentaries, unequivocally demonstrates that these acts by God served multiple purposes and provided the opportunity for mankind to accept the truth of God's existence. There is no greater example of this than in a seemingly benign comment by Rashi in this week's parsha.

Immediately following God's revelation to Moshe about the details regarding makas bechoros, and prior to the presentation of the first mitzvah to the nation, the Torah tells us (Shemos 11:9-10):

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Weekly Parsha



RECLAIMING ONE'S DIGNITY

RABBI REUVEN MANN

In this week's parsha, Bo, we read about the final stage of the Enslavement in Egypt. The Jews were not only liberated from physical servitude, they were being spiritually redeemed as well. Thus they had to separate themselves from the primitive paganism of Egypt and attach themselves to the commandments of Hashem. They were given the mitzvah of the Passover sacrifice which was to be performed on

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(Bo cont. from pg. 1)

Weekly Parsha

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Weekly Journal on Jewish Thought



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And all of these servants of yours will come down to me. And they will bow to me saying, "Go forth – you and all of the nation at your feet." And afterwards I will depart. And he left Paroh in a show of anger. (Shemot 11:8)

After nine plagues, Paroh refuses to release Bnai Yisrael. Moshe tells Paroh of the final plague. In the tenth plague, Hashem will destroy the firstborn of the Egyptians. Moshe reveals to Paroh that this punishment will break the will of the Egyptians to resist. Paroh's closest ministers will plead with Moshe to take Bnai Yisrael out of bondage. The plague had the effect foretold by Moshe. The Egyptians entreated the Jewish people to leave the Land. Paroh himself beseeched Moshe to lead Bnai Yisrael out of the Land.

Rashi explains that Moshe knew that Paroh himself would seek him out and plead with him to spare Egypt. Moshe did not reveal this detail to Paroh. This omission was intentional. Moshe was showing respect for the dignity of the king. He, therefore, indicated that the ministers would petition him.[1]

Paroh was a rasha – an evil person. He had persecuted the Jewish people and refused to heed to the command of Hashem. He remained obstinate even after his own people had suffered terribly. It seems odd that Moshe would feel compelled to respect the honor of this corrupt monarch!

In order to answer this question, let us consider a related issue. Shulchan Aruch explains that we are required to recite a blessing upon seeing a king or ruler. This applies even to a non-Jewish ruler. The blessing recited is Blessed are You Hashem, our G-d, the King of the universe, who gave from His glory to creatures of flesh and blood.[2] This blessing is required regardless of the moral standing of the king. There is an important lesson to be learned from this requirement. We must recognize the importance of governmental authority within society. This concept is succinctly expressed in another teaching of our Sages. The Talmud instructs us to pray regularly for the welfare of the government. The Sages explain that without government, people would cruelly destroy one another.[3] A specific ruler may be evil and abuse his or her power. However, the institution of governmental authority is essential to the survival of society. This concept provides insight into the

blessing. The blessing is not designed to praise the ruler. The blessing is an acknowledgment of the institution represented by the monarch or leader. Therefore, the blessing is required, regardless of the moral integrity of the specific king.

Paroh did not deserve respect as an individual. He was an evil, despicable despot. Despite these personal qualities, he still represented an important institution. He was ruler of Egypt. Moshe recognized the importance of governmental authority. He showed respect to that institution not to Paroh.

This understanding of the obligation to respect the king – even a despot – suggests a solution to another problem. Maimonides explains in his Mishne Torah – his code of law – that we are required to treat a King of Israel with deep respect. We are obligated to behave towards the King with



deference and awe. Among the laws that are designed to instill a proper sense of respect for the king are a prohibition against sitting upon the throne or even the chair of the King, or riding upon his horse. Personal elements of his property may not be used by others. His widow may only remarry another King of Israel. In addition to the many laws that govern the behavior of the people towards their King, there are also a number of laws designed to assure that the King conduct himself in a dignified manner. Among these laws is even a requirement for meticulous personal grooming.[4] This requirement upon the King seems

intuitively reasonable. The people are required to respect the King. He is required to act in a manner that encourages this respect and to avoid behaviors that will undermine the people's deference towards him.

We are also required to act respectfully to Torah scholars. Maimonides explains that the level of deference due a Torah scholar even supersedes that due a parent. However, in describing the requirement to respect the Torah scholar, Maimonides does not mention any requirement upon the scholar to conduct himself in a dignified manner.[5] In other words, Maimonides does not describe a set of requirements upon the Torah scholar parallel to the King's requirement to conduct himself with dignity.[6]

Rav Chaim Soloveitchik suggested that

(continued on next page)

Maimonides' divergent treatments of the King and the Torah scholar reflects that we are required to act with deference to both. However, whereas the King is required to act in a manner that encourages other to treat him with esteem, the Torah scholar is not subject to a similar requirement.[7] Of course, this raises an obvious question: Why does the Torah not require the scholar to conduct himself with dignity – as it requires of the King?

The above discussion provides a plausible explanation for Maimonides' distinction between the King and a Torah scholar. The respect due to the King is not directed to him personally. We are required to respect and act with deference to the institution represented by the monarch. This obligation applies to the people of Israel and extends to the King as well. The people must respect the institution and the King must conduct himself in a manner that dignifies the institution. In contrast, the respect and deference due to the Torah scholar are not directed to the scholar on a personal level. Neither is there an institution of "Torah scholar" that these requirements are intended to uphold. Instead, we are required to honor the Torah. The Torah scholar represents Torah. It is for this reason alone that we are required to act towards him with respect and deference.

The intent and design of the obligation to honor the Torah scholar is reflected in Maimonides' formulation of the obligation. In his introduction to the Laws of Torah Study, he explains that this section of his Mishne Torah discusses the laws included in two commandments:

- The study of Torah.
- Honoring those who teach Torah and know Torah.

At first glance, this wording seems needlessly cumbersome. Why did Maimonides not define the second mitzvah as "to honor Torah scholars"? Why did he adopt a more complex and wordy description for the commandment? The above discussion suggests that Maimonides carefully selected his words. His intention is to communicate that the Torah scholar is not honored because he has achieved a station or status that demands respect. In other words, he is not honored because of who he is. Instead, he is treated with reverence because of his association with the Torah. He is a teacher of the Torah or one who knows the Torah.

Now, the distinction between the King and the Torah scholar can be understood. The King shares with the people the obligation to promote respect of the institution of governmental authority. The people must act with deference to the King and the



King must conduct himself with appropriate dignity. In contrast, the respect we are required to demonstrate to a Torah scholar is an expression of reverence for the Torah. The scholar and the people must demonstrate this reverence through their conduct towards those who are associated with Torah – its teachers and scholars. However, there is no institution of "the Torah scholar" that the Torah scholar is required to promote.

This discussion provides a possible explanation for another apparent inconsistency in Maimonides' treatment of these two instances of mandated reverence. In his discussion of the obligation to respect the Torah scholar, Maimonides asserts that this obligation is engendered by a specific commandment. However, in his discussion of the respect due to the King, Maimonides does not identify a commandment that specifically legislates this attitude and behavior of deference. The inescapable conclusion is that the obligation to behave with respect towards the monarch is not engendered by its own specific commandment. Instead, this obligation is included in the commandment that authorizes the institution of the King of Israel. In other words, in creating this institution, the Torah implicitly created an obligation to honor the institution. The institution is meaningless unless it is associated with an obligation of obedience to the King and respect towards the monarch.

However, the obligation to honor the Torah scholar must be legislated by a specific command-

ment. This is because the scholar's status and station do not intrinsically produce an obligation to revere the scholar. Instead, this obligation expresses the relationship between the scholar and the Torah. A specific mitzvah is required in order to legislate this association or to establish that the Torah is honored through the reverence we demonstrate towards the scholar.[8] ■

[1] Rabbaynu Shlomo ben Yitzchak (Rashi), Commentary on Sefer Shemot 11:8.

[2] Rav Yosef Karo, Shulchan Aruch, Orech Chayim 224:8.

[3] Mesechet Avodah Zarah 4a.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Melachim 2:1-5.

[5] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Mishne Torah, Hilchot Talmud Torah 5-6.

[6] It should be noted that in his discussion of the requirement to act with respect towards Torah scholars, Maimonides omits mention of a requirement of the scholar to conduct himself with dignity. However, he does describe a detailed set of requirements that govern the personal conduct of the Torah scholar in an earlier section of his Mishne Torah. This section deals with development of proper personal character and the importance of moderation in one's personal behavior. His inclusion of these laws in that section suggests that they are not an expression of a requirement upon the scholar to conduct himself with dignity. Instead, these laws are intended as a standard of personal behavior consistent with the Torah scholar's pursuit of personal excellence. For example, this section includes laws governing proper dress for a Torah scholar. The scholar must dress in clean, modest, and moderate clothing. However, this is not an expression of personal dignity associated with his status as a scholar. Instead, Maimonides posits that it is a personal virtue for a person to dress with reasonable care and moderation. A Torah scholar should seek personal excellence even in this area of life and therefore, dress in an appropriate manner.

[7] Kol Brisk, Introduction p 20a.

[8] Maimonides explains in Mishne Torah, Hilchot Klai Mikdash that the Kohen Gadol – the High Priest – must conduct himself with dignity. Maimonides does not cite a mitzvah specifically legislating this requirement. This suggests that this obligation stems from the mitzvah that establishes the institution of the priesthood. In creating this institution, the Torah demanded that the person heading this institution – the Kohen Gadol – conduct himself in a manner that dignifies the institution.

"God said to Moshe, "Pharaoh will not listen to you. Thus I will multiply My wonders in the land of Egypt." Moshe and Aharon had done all these wonders before Pharaoh. [However] God hardened Pharaoh's heart and he did not send the B'nei Yisrael out of his land."

What new information is to be gleaned from these two verses?

Rashi focuses on the multiplication of wonders (ibid 9):

"The word 'mofsa' [in the plural] represents two [wonders], 'revos' -increase - represents a third [wonder]: the killing of the first-born, the splitting of Yam Suf, and the turbulent stirring of the Egyptians."

According to Rashi, then, these three future wonders would seem to be the "cure" for Pharaoh's intransigence. What was so different about these three? Another question concerns the third category. The Torah (ibid 14:27) explains that God was "menaer" – stirred up – the Egyptians as the waters came crashing down on them in the sea. Rashi (ibid) elaborates, based on the Midrash, that it is analogous to a person taking a pot of food and turning it over, mixing up everything inside so that that which was on top is now on the bottom and vice versa. While this is certainly a graphic description of the end of the Egyptians' pursuit, it seems to be more of a detail under the subheading of splitting of the sea. How does this secondary feature merit its own category? Would Pharaoh not listen simply because the Egyptians were not thoroughly tossed around?

The Ramban (ibid) adds an additional question after offering his own answer. The Ramban indicates that Pharaoh and his people, after seeing Moshe's predictions consistently come true, and after hearing about the next plague decimating the population, would be extremely fearful. In this state of mind, it would seem probable that Pharaoh would let Bnei Yisrael leave prior to the onset of the final plague. Therefore, God hardens Pharaoh's heart once again, ensuring that the exodus wouldn't take place until after this plague. God's reference to Pharaoh not listening at that time actually meant God would intervene to bring about this result. The Ramban then attacks Rashi's explanation, based on the fact that the Torah clearly indicates Pharaoh did not send Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt (until after the tenth plague). The problem is that the splitting of the sea and the death of the Egyptians (as cited by Rashi) occurred after he actually sent them out – so how would this work into the explanation of these wonders occurring in order to change Pharaoh's mind and allow Bnei Yisrael to leave?

Let's first understand the explicit description of the death of the Egyptians. The Torah (ibid 14:21) explains that the splitting of the sea involved a wind being directed through this body of water for



an extended period of time. As long as this wind remained, the sea would remain split. And, of course, the removal of this wind would, by definition, return the sea to its natural state. Anyone still caught on the dry land when this wind was removed would perish. If this is the case, then the death of the Egyptians would be viewed as a byproduct of the essential miracle—the splitting of the sea. At some point the sea had to stop being split and the death of the Egyptians would simply be the result of God's ending of this incident. Yet the Torah goes out of its way to tell us that God Himself caused the Egyptians to be tossed around. One implication from this is that the water returning to its normal state would not necessarily have produced this result of menaer. The more important detail, though, is God's personal involvement in this aspect of the process. It seems God's intent was that it would be indisputable that He alone was the primary cause of the death of the Egyptians, rather than their demise being a secondary effect of the wind being removed. This active involvement in their deaths, reflected in the characteristic of menaer, would lead one to conclude that God was directly involved with their destruction, rather than it being perceived as a byproduct.

The question, then, is why was it so important for God to act in such a manner, to bring so much focus to this type of destructive act? To answer this requires an understanding of the transition in God's plan from the first nine plagues to the final act and the subsequent departure of Bnei Yisrael. Part of the objective of the plagues was to demonstrate

God's dominance over nature. However, these attempts were not enough to bring about the release of Bnei Yisrael from Egypt, nor were they sufficient to bring about a complete recognition of the truth of God. Therefore, God acts in a manner where His existence is unquestionable. The first element of this is the construct of the tenth plague, the killing of the Egyptian first born. The previous plagues were awe inspiring events, but they worked within nature. What made the last plague qualitatively distinct is that there was no natural cause attributable to this event. There is no affliction that strikes only Egyptian first born people and animals at a specific midnight. Therefore, this plague would be undeniably an act of God. We see this in the haggada, where God explains on the night of the exodus that He alone would pass over the houses of the Jews, striking the Egyptian first born. The emphasis is that it would be done by God alone, not through an intermediary, such as an angel. This expression of God's control over nature leads to one clear conclusion – God is the Creator. Yet this alone would be an incomplete expression of God's relationship to the universe. God has a unique relationship with mankind, manifest through the system of *schar v'onesh*, reward and punishment. This relationship was on full display at the splitting of the sea, where He ensured the safety of Bnei Yisrael from the pursuing Egyptians. To just have this aspect of God's justice would be incomplete – there is the side of *onesh* (punishment) as well. This might be the reason why there is such emphasis on the tossing around of the Egyptians. God was demonstrating punishment through His active engagement in their deaths. Therefore, we see through these three events God's Justice and God as the Creator, the two main avenues of God's relationship to the universe.

This might also help answer the Ramban's question. The Ramban's idea is that Pharaoh's refusal to listen was in the practical context of releasing Bnei Yisrael. In this case, Pharaoh might have ultimately let them go had it not been for God's intervention. Rashi understood this refusal to listen in a different context, that of his inability to accept the truth of God. It could only be through these events and God's clear manifestation of His relationship to the universe as Creator and *Shofet*, that Pharaoh would finally lose the ability to deny the reality of God.

The above is but one small example of the infinite amount of ideas and concepts that can be drawn out from analyzing this transformative period in the history of the Jewish people and the entire world. It is crucial, then, to view these events beyond simply punishment to the Egyptians. In reality, there all were a vehicle for mankind to see the truth of God's existence, unique moments that serve as catalysts for *yediyas Hashem*. ■

the PLAGUE of the Firstborn



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Immediately prior to Moses' descent to Egypt to address Pharaoh for the first time, we read the following:

"And Moses took his wife and his sons and rode them on the donkey and returned towards the land of Egypt, and Moses took the staff of God in his hand. And God said to Moses, 'When you go to return to Egypt, see all the wonders that I have placed in your hand and do them before Pharaoh, and I will harden his heart and he will not send the people'. And you will say to Pharaoh, 'So says God, 'Israel is My firstborn'. And I say to you, 'send My people and they will serve Me, and if you refuse to send, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons'." (Exod. 4:20-23)

We wonder what God's message is here, "Israel is My firstborn". What does this mean, and what is the objective in Moses telling this to Pharaoh? Another central question is why God saw it necessary to plague the Egyptians by killing their firstborns. What is the reason for this plague? It is difficult to understand this seemingly "tit for tat" response: since the Egyptians abused the Jews (God's "firstborn") so God kills 'their' firstborns? It smacks if an incomprehensible sense of justice. For God's firstborn Jews, are only "firstborns" in a metaphoric sense, while God is attacking the very real firstborns of the Egyptians.

What is also interesting is that there is no mention here of the intervening nine plagues. In this warning, God outlines His response to Pharaoh's refusal, with the Plague of Firstborns – jumping to the last plague with no mention of all He planned to do prior to that final blow. Why then is the Plague of the Firstborns the only plague mentioned here, if God was going to also plague Egypt with nine others? To compound this question, we notice the Torah's prescribed response to our sons, that we only mention this Plague of Firstborns:

"And it will be when your son asks you tomorrow saying, 'What is this?' and you shall say to him, 'With a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery...And it was when Pharaoh hardened his heart from sending us, that God killed the firstborns of the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man until the firstborn of beast, therefore, I sacrifice to God all male firstborn [animals], and all firstborn sons I redeem'. And it shall be a sign on your hand and frontlets between your eyes that with a mighty hand God took us out of Egypt." (Exod. 13:14-16)

It is clear that there is a special significance of the Plague of Firstborns: this plague alone is included in our address to our children. Additionally, of the Tefillin's four sections, two sections deal with the firstborn. The significance of firstborns is also evident in the Torah command of redeeming our firstborn sons. So we see that this is a theme in Torah, and not a one-time occurrence.

We also wonder at the reason why God killed not only the firstborn humans, but also the animals. (ibid, 11:5, 12:12) We must note that in this latter verse 12:12, God includes therein that He will not only kill the firstborns from man to beast, but also the Egyptian gods:

"And I will pass through the land of Egypt on this night, and I will smite all firstborns in the land of Egypt – from man to beast – and in all the gods of Egypt I will do justice, I am God."

What is the connection between killing firstborns and God's act of defaming the god's of Egypt (the idols) that God joins these two themes in one single verse?

Ibn Ezra: Wrong Prioritization

Ibn Ezra states: "The reason behind 'My firstborn son' – this is the nation which their forefathers served Me in the beginning, and I have mercy on them, as a father has mercy over his son who serves him. And you (Egypt) desire to take them as eternal slaves?! Therefore, I will kill your firstborn sons." (Exod. 4:22) Ibn Ezra points to the core issue: the Egyptians did not recognize the Jews as observing the proper life for man. This is expressed in their enslavement of this people. Ibn Ezra is elaborating on God's sentiment that He will kill the firstborns. For some just reason, God must kill the Egyptian firstborns as the correct response. But what is correct about this response? As we mentioned, it seems tit for tat, with no apparent relationship between a metaphoric firstborn Jewish nation, and the real, Egyptian firstborn sons. What is correlative between a metaphor and a reality? But in fact, God does go so far as to engage the very institution of firstborns, recognized by the Egyptians. Let me explain.

To threaten anyone, the object of a threat must target something of value. To "threaten", means to make one feel he will lose something valued. God is thereby teaching us that the Egyptians cared quite a bit for their firstborns. But why did they? Is there anything in the Torah's verses, which may teach us about this value placed on their firstborns?

We notice that God did not only threaten the human sons, but God also said He will kill firstborn animals. We also noticed, this was stated in a single Torah verse together with God's plan to destroy the Egyptian idols. There must be a relationship between firstborn sons, firstborn animals, and idolatry. What is it?

Firstborn's Preeminence: Egypt's Idolatry

I believe this flaw of the Egyptian culture was the overestimation of anything firstborn – even beasts. For some reason, they imagined a

(continued on next page)

firstborn to possess a superadded quality, which all other living beings were denied. The proof that this value was unreal, and was manufactured from their imagination is their overt expression that firstborn beasts too possessed preeminence. With that, their idolatrous emotions are exposed: they equated man to animal.

God's very response of destroying firstborn beasts, addresses the precise flaw: God addresses that which is corrupt, i.e., their notion that "firstborns are of elevated status", and animals share prominence with man. The very equation the Egyptians made between animals to man, in that even firstborn beasts were celebrated, was idolatrous in nature. God underlines this idolatrous current by joining to the firstborns, His plan to abolish the idols...and in the very same verse. God equated the preeminence placed on firstborns with idols. "Idolatry" is not limited to idol worship, nor is it limited to man's approach to a deity - but to any expression not based in reality, and projected from man's fantasy. Therefore, idolatry will include acts such as tossing pennies to a well for success; assuming black cats cause bad "luck"; believing that 'luck' exists; that Hebrew prayer books will protect our cars; that Mezuzas protect us; that keys in Challas are protective; or that red bendels affect reality. All these and unfortunately more acts are idolatrous.

Regarding Egypt's idolatry in this case, reality bears no evidence of greatness in that which leaves the womb first. The Egyptians' only imagined there to be some greatness in firstborns. Living life based on imagination is idolatrous in nature. Death played a major role in Egyptian culture (pyramids are their eternal resting places) so life too - as the other pole of this highlighted spectrum - shared their primary focus. That which was first in receiving life from a parent was imagined to be special. We see a close tie between the fear of mortality, and the elevated status Egypt placed on firstborns. Thus, life and death were central focus in Egypt. [1] And he who was firstborn, they felt, possessed a greater distinction in that his "life" was even more prized.

God's Justice

Now we understand from where came this firstborn status. We also understand why God would seek to remove a wrong idea maintained by the Egyptians. But why was God going to kill the firstborns, in response to their enslavement of the Jews? For this, we refer back to the original quote, "Israel is My firstborn". And I say to you, "send My people and they will serve Me,

and if you refuse to send, behold, I will kill your firstborn sons'." If firstborns in truth possessed no real difference in status, why does God call Israel HIS firstborn? I believe this had to be, as God wished to talk "in their language". God wished to express to the Egyptian culture who was truly the prized personality. And since this designation was the firstborns in Egyptian culture, God used their jargon, calling Israel the real firstborn of nations.

God wished to correct the Egyptians' opinion of who is truly the most celebrated individual, or who would truly be called a "firstborn" metaphorically in God's eyes. Ibn Ezra assists us here. As he stated, God was reprimanding the Egyptians for having enslaved the people whose forefathers worshipped God. These righteous people, God said, are the true "firstborns" or the people who live life properly. But at this point, Egypt maintained that even a firstborn animal was more celebrated than a Jew, so much, that the Jew could be enslaved, while a firstborn animal was free. This is intolerable in God's system: he who follows God is the most celebrated individual. And to point this out to Egypt, to dispel this foolish notion that a firstborn carries any significance, God warned the Egyptians to recognize the Hebraic, monotheistic life and free these Hebrews to practice, or suffer the consequence of realizing how little import your firstborns are...they will be killed.

This is God's ultimatum to Pharaoh: "Recognize whose life is truly valued most, or you will lose your purpose for living. Projecting fantasy onto reality, assuming firstborns - even animals - possess greater status, while Abraham's descendants are imprisoned, is a worthless life, and My destruction of your firstborns will teach this to you Pharaoh". This is the sense of God's message. We may also answer why God killed any firstborn Jew who did not kill the Paschal lamb: this lack of adherence to God, displays a stronger bond to Egypt, than to God. Hence, these Jews also partook of the idolatrous way of life, and did not deserve salvation. In fact, Rashi teaches that four fifths of the Jewish population was destroyed in Egypt.

Why was God's initial warning to Pharaoh bereft of any mention of the other nine plagues? Why does our response to our children's question on Passover include the statement, "And it was when Pharaoh hardened his heart from sending us, that God killed the firstborns of the land of Egypt from the firstborn of man until the firstborn of beast"? Sforno answers. (Exod 4:22) Sforno says that only the Plague of Firstborns was intended as a "punishment"

while all others were intended to display God's control of the Earth. Only the Plague of Firstborns was an act of "measure for measure" says Sforno. Therefore, it makes sense why God tells Moses upon his initial address to Pharaoh to say, "Let the Jews go, or your firstborns will be killed." Herein is an act of punishment, not so with regards to the other plagues. (It makes sense, that God will threaten Pharaoh with that, intended as punishment) And when we answer our children on Passover, we remind them of how God punished the Egyptians. Perhaps this is to also instill in them an appreciation that God defends us, and saved us. The central theme of Passover is that God is our Savior.

Summary

From our study, we learn that the Exodus has an additional facet: God's deliverance of the Jew from under the hands of those who valued firstborn animals over intelligent man, was a lesson in "who is the most celebrated personality": it is not he who projects imagined status onto senseless beasts, but he who adheres to the reasoned lifestyle. He who adheres to Abraham's model follows God's choicest lifestyle - extricating himself as did Abraham, from idolatry with reason alone, and finding God.

Ultimately, the Plague of Firstborns teaches us that a reasoned life is God's desire, and he, who lacks reason, and projects imagination onto reality, is against God. ■

Footnotes:

[1] History shows that the Egyptians painted idealized scenes from daily life on the walls of their pyramid tombs which included agricultural work, tending cattle and fishing, artisans at their work, including gold workers and boat-builders, and domestic scenes of banquets with musicians, dancers and guests. The scenes in the tomb represented the hoped for after-life, in which there were fertile fields and harmony and happiness at home. Representing it in the tomb was thought to 'ensure' an ideal existence in the next world: the tomb-owner would continue after death the occupations of this life. Therefore, everything required was packed in the tomb, along with the corpse. Writing materials were often supplied along with clothing, wigs, hairdressing supplies and assorted tools, depending on the occupation of the deceased. Often, model tools rather than full size ones, would be placed in the tomb; models were cheaper and took up less space and in the after-life would be magically transformed into the real thing.

Weekly Parsha



how
GOD
teaches
Man



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

We recently studied how God informed Moses of his error in his perception of his role, sending some type of serpent to afflict him, near-death. This taught Moses that he was in fact “dispensable” in God’s plan to redeem the Jews.

God uses precise wisdom in each and every one of His actions. From the very creation of the universe, through His miracles, His revelation at Sinai, His prophetic discourses with man, and His rewards and punishments, each and every instance is orchestrated with exact precision, and with definite reason. By examining each case, we may come to understand

exactly why God related to one man in this way, and another in a different manner. We can learn why in one case God would speak to a man, while in another, an event is used to educate another individual. In Moses’ case, he required to learn that his role was unnecessary for God’s plan: God may achieve His objectives through many means, and man, any man, cannot become indispensable. Therefore, God’s method of instructing Moses of his dispensability was just that: God brought Moses near death. What better method to teach of one’s dispensability?

God did not desire to simply destroy Pharaoh and Egypt. As the Medrash states, “God said to His angels, ‘You wish to sing while the works of My hands are drowning in the Red Sea?’” Meaning, God desires that all humankind recognize Him, and benefit from the best life, as outlined in His Torah. God created man and woman - not “Jew” and “Gentile”. Other religions are mankind’s corrupt inventions which Judaism in part seeks to correct. God desires all members of mankind enjoy the best life. When the Egyptian army required extermination, it was not God’s original plan for these men, those who could have lived a life of wisdom. It was for this reason that God sent a host of plagues: each one carrying a unique lesson aimed at extricating Egypt from its philosophy of sub-deities, replacing their fallacy with truths about God. As the Egyptians’ flaw was the belief in powers other than God, God responded by displaying that He alone controls every object and law in the universe. The first three plagues displayed God’s control of the Earth; the second three, events on the Earth; and the last three, His control of the heavens. God displayed His complete and absolute control over the heavens, the Earth, and all between them. No stone was left unturned. Egypt realized that their assumed gods were in fact imaginations, and that the God of the Hebrews was in fact the true, One and only God. Again we see that God’s response perfectly addressed man’s corruptions. For this reason we also read that God judged the Egyptian gods, melting metal idols, and rotting the wooden ones. (Rashi on Exod. 12:12) Through witnessing the very destruction of their carved and molten idols, Egypt was forced to recognize their gods as useless, and something else – God – is in total control.

Whatever the circumstances are, and whatever the need of that person or people, God’s response will match perfectly. We also cited the words of God’s prophet Malachi, “I

am God, I do not change...” (Malachi, 3:6) This teaches man that as God is without defect, He remains this way – nothing can affect Him. But this also teaches that God’s methods of instructing humankind do not change: He continues to employ precise wisdom as the fabric that woven through all of His actions, which are truly to educate us. Therefore, we must not forfeit any precious chance to educate ourselves by studying His actions. As God worked in the times of the Bible, and in previous generations, He continues to work.

But we also learn that God teaches man by way of subtle indication, in place of outright clarity, because God does not desire that mankind simply “hear His word”, and respond, without thinking. For this reason, Revelation at Sinai was a one-time event, “A great voice that did not continue.” (Deut. 5:19) This outright, undeniable proof of God’s existence was necessary. However, not being present at Sinai, we, the future generation, would require intelligence to derive this proof of God’s existence. God does not wish to create miracles always, and thus writes, “A great voice that did not continue.” Miracles are not God’s plan for mankind’s approach to Him.

God’s plan for mankind is to observe the universe, and with his intellect, understand the nature of things. Study of God’s created world and Bible (Torah) is man’s sole objective. To enable Moses to accomplish this, God did not communicate his sin in words, but displayed his sin – through an event – which afforded Moses the opportunity to “study God’s relationship to the world.” Without an event, Moses would have lost the opportunity to engage his mind. Only by witnessing the very real operation of the world, does man acknowledge a “reality” to God’s methods. This is how man attains wisdom. God’s methods of interacting with man are cryptic. Otherwise, there would be nothing compelling us to seek deeper wisdom. We would be at a dead end as soon as we exhausted our study of the limited, physical characteristics of the world. But God’s knowledge has no limits. He therefore created a system of “cryptic indication” which on the surface gives us one message. But if we seek additional understanding through analysis, much more wisdom and information will disclose itself. Both, the physical world and His Biblical and Prophetic words are designed in this manner. In both arenas, much knowledge awaits us...but only if we engage the mind – the only tool capable of unveiling God’s wisdom. ■

(Dignity continued from page 1)

Weekly Parsha

their final night in Egypt as a prerequisite for their freedom. In anticipation of the Exodus Moshe, at the behest of Hashem, instructed the people to request of their Egyptian neighbors and friends gifts of fine clothing and jewelry. Surprisingly, the Egyptians responded very generously and gave their best goods to the Jews.

At first glance it is difficult to comprehend the reason for Hashem's command to solicit precious items from the Egyptians. Rashi tells us it was in fulfillment of His promise to Avraham that when the Jews would leave they would depart with great wealth. However the method of obtaining the bounty seems strange. If the purpose was compensation for the forced labor then it should have been presented as a demand to Pharaoh, who would be obliged to make reparations from the national treasury of Egypt. The idea of having each man and woman, approach their Egyptian friends and ask for valuable objects to "borrow" seems strange.

In my opinion the purpose of the gifts was not for the sake of financial remuneration for forced labor. The worst aspect of the enslavement was the damage it inflicted on the psyche of the Jews. Verbal abuse is a Biblical transgression and in many ways can be more damaging than physical affliction. People who suffer mistreatment often internalize the attitudes of their oppressors and nurture a feeling of self hate. The Torah is very concerned about the dignity of man, for only a person who feels good about himself can lead a productive life and have a meaningful relationship with Hashem.

Before departing Egypt Hashem gave the Jews a very significant mitzvah whose purpose was to break their attachment to idolatry and initiate them in the Divine service based on Torah and mitzvot. However, to serve G-d properly one must strive to keep his body and psyche in the best possible condition. The enslavement had inflicted great damage on their sense of dignity and self respect. A person who lacks self esteem cannot fulfill his purpose in life. G-d intervened to alter the attitude of the Egyptians toward the Jews. Their previous feeling of disdain was replaced with a sense of awe for the Jewish people and their fearless leader Moses. The Jews now held special favor and charm in the eyes of the Egyptians. Hashem did a lot but there are certain things He insists that man must do for himself. The Jews were required to reclaim

their dignity by overcoming their inhibitions and "requesting gifts of silver and gold and clothing" from their Egyptian neighbors, so that they could be properly attired when they had their Festival to Hashem in the wilderness. We are commanded to show respect for all people since man reflects the "image of G-d." Indeed, the Torah commands us to "love one's friend as oneself." In order to properly respect others we must first esteem ourselves.

Shabbat Shalom

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the Message of Tefillin

GIVING MEANING TO RITUAL



RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

We just finished reading Parshas Bo, where God delivered the last of His 10 Plagues. During the Plague of the Firstborns, all Egyptians feared that each one of them – not just firstborns – would perish. Therefore, they expelled the Jews in a national panic. (Exod. 12:33)

Towards the very end of Parshas Bo (Exod. 13:9) God commands the Jews to wear Tefillin. The reason given is that we should bear a sign and remember that “Biyad Chazzakah” (with a mighty hand) did God take us out of Egypt. This is reiterated in the final verse of Bo (13:16) “for with a mighty hand did God take us out of Egypt” where we are further informed that Tefillin and redeeming the firstborns are ‘eternal’ laws. Animals too must be redeemed, since God smote all firstborns of man and beast (12:29).

These two sections at the end of Bo, in which we find these two instances of “Biyad Chazzakah” and Tefillin’s command, form the first two of the Tefillin’s four sections. The third and fourth sections of the Tefillin are the first two paragraphs of the Shema. Through Tefillin’s containment of these Torah sections referring to the final plague, redeeming firstborns and Tefillin, we thereby give testimony always to God’s “mighty hand” which redeemed us. But what exactly does “mighty hand” mean? Why is it so essential that it be repeated? Why is a new command of Tefillin

constructed around “Biyad Chazzakah”, and the Shema? We must be clear that “Biyad Chazzakah” – not the Shema – is Tefillin’s primary focus and definition. For when it is first mentioned in the Torah, “Biyad Chazzakah” and Tefillin are mentioned together, with no mention of the Shema. Thus, Tefillin and “Biyad Chazzakah” are intimately related. What is this relationship?

“Biyad Chazzakah”

Ezekiel 20:8,9 teaches that God would have destroyed the Jewish nation in Egypt due to our attachment to idolatry. “Biyad Chazzakah” is therefore more apropos of the Jews leaving Egypt, than any other event. As we required the abandonment of the Egyptian culture that had laid its seeds in generations of Jews, a reiteration of God’s “mighty hand” – the miracles – addressed our idolatrous attachment head on.

Getting back to our debate on Obama’s site, the one participant wished to leave God out of the discussion. This is exactly the lesson of “Biyad Chazzakah”. When God wished Egypt to live properly, He attempted to educate them away from idolatrous fantasy by displaying the stark reality that only He could alter natural law, since only He created it. All other idols and gods are

imposters and never did what God did, as they are all lifeless, human carvings. As one of the Sages put it, “Where were all the other gods when God said at Sinai, “I am God”? Why didn’t any other god object? Humorous: but to the point.

Similarly, when God took the Jews out of Egypt, He did so “Biyad Chazzakah”, through miracles. Why?

The purpose was to make it clear: the One who frees you, is the Creator, and this is proved only when miracles are present. Thus, “Biyad Chazzakah” is a fundamental. We will say more on this shortly.

As Saadia Gaon taught, miracles prove God’s involvement, and this is why He utilizes them when endorsing a prophet. For only when a miracle is performed, is the prophet proven as God’s true emissary.

God wished for the Jews too – just as He wished for the Egyptians – that man lead his life based on reality. And the ultimate reality is that this universe has a Creator. This is not some selfish desire God possesses, that man seeks, studies and praises Him. For God created desires like selfishness, and therefore they do not guide Him. God created human life – and the life of angels – so that intelligent creatures might recognize Him, and enjoy continued study about God and His creations. This study would offer man and angel a perfected

(continued on next page)

(Tefillin continued from previous page)

Weekly Parsha

existence unparalleled by any other involvement. Putting it simply: God offered mankind ultimate happiness by creating him with intellect. The meaning of life may be summed up as a truly pleasure-seeking existence. Man's flaw however is his confusion about what might offer the richest pleasure. Man is duped by blindly accepted rules like "the masses must be right", and "physical success will offer happiness", and many others.

The Jewish Identity: a "Redeemed" People

Now, as God wishes the best for His creations as testified by His perfectly designed and orchestrated world, He desired that the Jews – now freed – would consider how this freedom came to be.

A wise Rabbi taught that the very emergence and formation of the Jewish People must have occurred through God's redemption. This means that the Jewish identity is a "people redeemed by God". God did not wish the Jews to taste freedom, free of Him. God wished the best for the Jews and all people. He therefore freed the Jews...for the sake of following His commands. The Jew cannot view himself as separate from God. For at our inception as a people, God redeemed us from slavery and guided us towards Sinai "to receive His Torah".

This is the fundamental of Tefillin: that we wear reminders of miracles...phenomena that could only have been performed by the Creator of natural law. These Tefillin will remind us throughout the day of our true purpose for having been created. God did not create each of us so we might follow our passions, or other misled cultures. God created man with intellect so that he might intensely enjoy life. And the most intense enjoyment is when man makes new discoveries. Steak, sex, cars, homes, clothes and fame...all briefly lived moments. All become tiresome, painful with overindulgence...some even embarrassing if publicized. But engaging in scientific experiments and theories; Talmudic inquiry; philosophical debate; and pondering God's existence and His will...all of these intrigue us, captivate us, and allow our full energies to become immersed and offer startling new discoveries at every turn.

Wearing Tefillin recalls God's Firstborn plague, the "Yad Chazzakah" the mighty hand...miracles. Tefillin focus us each day on why we exist...to relate to the Creator of those miracles. To realize we were created for one purpose: to enjoy the world of wisdom, which is a reflection of the Creator. As such, we now understand why the Shema is also contained in the Tefillin. For the Shema elaborates on God's "exclusive" role as Creator. He is One. There are no others. This is another fundamental.

Tefillin direct man's thoughts to regularly save him from escaping into fantasy and deluded worlds where man lives without God. When we consider that we became a nation through miracles, we cannot avoid God's essential role in our lives. But if we are wiser than that, we consider that God didn't only redeem us...He created us.

Humans are Incomplete Beings

The Talmud states, "Man is a sick being, but a bandage is available. The bandage is Torah."

The lesson is that man is not independent. One might think so, as man seems to possess all he needs: circulatory, respiratory and digestive systems, muscles, and a rigid skeletal frame. However, without regularly engaging in Torah study, we are left to our emotions...that destroy our values and ideas.

The very design of Tefillin – that it is affixed to our bodies – teaches another primary lesson: man's design is incomplete. Since people view the "form" of man as a perfectly working machine, God commanded that Tefillin are affixed to our outline with oddly protruding boxes, so as to refute the assumption that the human figure is perfect. Rejecting the physical human profile and now calling it imperfect without Tefillin, God rejects man's elevation of the bodily form. God offers an opening for us to consider that there is

more to us than they beauty of our form. There is more tom life than the physical world.

Think about the grandeur the Greeks bestowed on the body through statues and Olympics performed in the nude. Although the Greeks took it to extremes, all men possess the overestimation of physical forms, or what we call 'design'. Tefillin teach that man is much more. Our forms are not beautiful, if we neglect our intangible souls. Tefillin awaken man to reject the Greek philosophy...a philosophy only publicized by the Greeks, but unconsciously valued by all.

Why are Tefillin squares? Perhaps this perfect geometric shape is a direct contrast to the fluid and curvaceous design of the human profile. Nothing in the human form mirrors a cubic shape. Our eyes are perfect circles; our noses hint to triangles...but nothing is a cube. Square or cubed, Tefillin thereby reject the notion that the human being is perfect by itself. No. Something of geometric, or scientific design must capture the human if he is to be truly praiseworthy, and if he is to truly enjoy his existence as God desired. The human form alone is meaningless, if when drawing his shape, we exclude two boxes in his portrait.

Without following God's moral instruction available in the Torah, Prophets and Writings, man is destined to bring much harm upon himself, and others. ■

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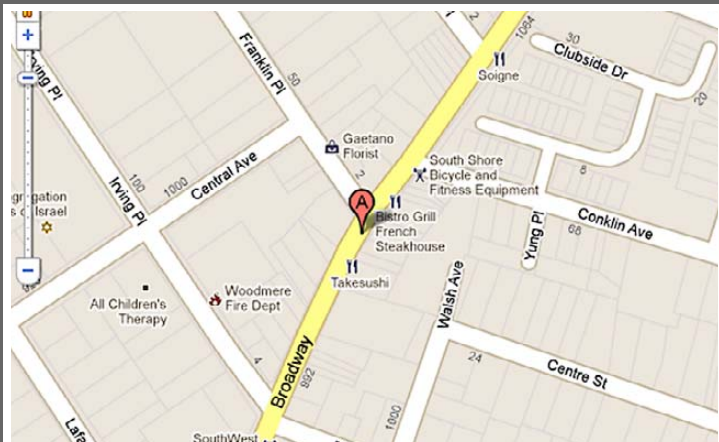


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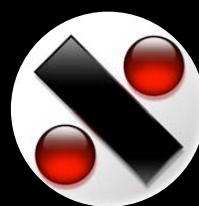
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