

**לְדַרוֹשׁ וְלַתּוֹר בַּחֲכָמָה (קֵהֶלֶת אִיג)**  
**Inquire And Explore With Wisdom**

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**תורה שבעל פה Talking Torah**  
**How Torah Talks to Us when We Talk**  
**Torah**

A case presentation of the Process of  
Midrash through generations, which  
shows how the basic ideas of Judaism  
were mined and refined from the gold  
lode of Torah.

**שמות**

**Volume 2 Exodus**

**Omer, Israel**

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## KEY TO TALKING TORAH THEMES

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*This is the first parasha of the book of Exodus. It begins with a flashback to the emigration of Jacob and his family to Egypt. The welcome they got from Pharaoh was replaced by suspicion and a plan by the king to enslave the nation that had sprung up from that family. One of the measures the new Pharaoh implements is murder of all sons born to Israelites. Two Levite parents try and hide their new born son in a basket on the Nile. He is found by Pharaoh's daughter, and saved when his sister, who had been keeping watch offers to find a nurse for the baby. He is named Moses by Pharaoh's daughter. He grows up, and apparently from his nurse, knows that he is one of the Hebrew slaves. He saves one slave from a beating by an Egyptian taskmaster. When this deed becomes known, Moses flees Egypt to Midian, where he marries and has children. One day when tending his flocks, God appears to him in a burning bush and demands that he return to Egypt to deliver a Divine message to let the Israelites go back to their ancestral country of Israel. Moses demurs, but God insists, and God tells him that his older brother Aaron will help him. Pharaoh increases the burden of the slaves, and Moses and his brother Aaron are accused by the Israelites of turning Pharaoh against them by their demands for release. Moses is crestfallen at this accusation, and he, in turn, lashes out against God saying that He had forced him into an impossible situation, and that He had done nothing to save Israel.*

**\*Ex. 1, 1-5**

*These are the names of the sons of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each coming with his household: <sup>2</sup>Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah; <sup>3</sup>Issachar, Zebulun, and Benjamin; <sup>4</sup>Dan and Naphtali, Gad and Asher. <sup>5</sup>The total number of persons that were of Jacob's issue came to seventy, Joseph being already in Egypt.*

The book of Shemot starts off with a rehash of the list of those coming to Egypt with Jacob. We all know that this is a source of comment as to why this information is repeated here, after it is already mentioned in Gen. 46:8-27. One commentator, **Rabbeinu Bahya ibn Pakuda**, calls attention to another problem in the list of Shemot 1:2-3: "Reuben, Shimon, Levi, and Judah. Issachar, Zevulun, and Benyamin.". The first six names are the sons of Leah, according to the order in which they are born, but then why is Benjamin mentioned out of order!!? The list continues, "Dan and Naftali Gad and Asher....and Joseph was in Egypt" (ibid. 4-5). Clearly the sons of Leah are first, those of Zilpah and Bilhah come after Benjamin, and why then is Joseph at the end? Clearly, the order of this list is a problem. It is neither chronological, nor by matriarchs, so what is the meaning of the order in the list?

Rabbeinu Bahya gives two answers. He first relates to Benjamin being 7th rather than 12th, which would be his chronological order. He points out that this order gives the reader the hint that the Bet ha-Mikdash will be in Benjamin's portion (relying apparently on **Zevachim 54a**, where the air-space of the Temple is Benjamin's). Then he goes on to say that in this order Benjamin is in the middle of the brothers, and the middle is what holds the ends together, and prevents the disintegration of Israel. Holy space is what will be the focal point of the nation and will somehow hold the differing factions within one framework.

He gives as a further example of this the Shabbat, which is the 7th day of the week, and yet is considered the middle of the week, that is, the focal point, the holy time to which all other time relates. Erev Shabbat is from Wednesday to Friday, and Motzei Shabbat is from Sunday till Tuesday. This is apparently based on halachot which specify work which cannot be started later than 3 days before Shabbat, i.e. Wednesday (e.g. **Shabbat 1:9, BT Shabbat 19a**). Starting Wed. if we find especially fine food, we put it aside for Shabbat. We know the halakha that one who forgot Havdalah can perform the ceremony till Tuesday, i.e. motzei Shabbat is till Tues. On this way of looking at things, the day which is most important in the week is Shabbat. We spend half the week in longing for the Shabbat which past, and the second half in preparation for the Shabbat which is coming.

This way we are always under the influence of the time set aside for God and our own spiritual life, our family, and for community. The most important day of the week is not the day on which a big business deal is to be completed, but the day of the spirit, a day which comes every week Shabbat. This way of looking at it, places Shabbat, like Benjamin in the list, in the middle of things. Shabbat is mid-week, around which all other days rotate.

It is like the middle branch of the Menorah. On each side three branches connect to the middle branch, which is the basis of the leg on which the whole Menorah stands. From, this way of looking at things the middle branch of the Menorah is the 7th branch, just as Benjamin is 7th and in the middle, and Shabbat is 7th, yet in the middle.

The second answer which Rabbeinu Bahya gives to the question of the strange order of the names is that by putting Joseph at the end and Benjamin in the middle we are told that the sons of Rachel and Leah should not lord it over the sons of Zilpah and Bilhah.

**\*Ex. 1, 15-17**

<sup>15</sup>The king of Egypt spoke to the Hebrew midwives, one of whom was named Shiphrah and the other Puah, <sup>16</sup>saying, "When you deliver the Hebrew women, look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live." <sup>17</sup>The midwives, fearing God, did not do as the king of Egypt had told them; they let the boys live.

**\*Ex. 2, 2-10**

<sup>2</sup>The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. <sup>3</sup>When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. <sup>4</sup>And his sister stationed herself at a distance, to learn what would befall him.

<sup>5</sup>The daughter of Pharaoh came down to bathe in the Nile, while her maidens walked along the Nile. She spied the basket among the reeds and sent her slave girl to fetch it. <sup>6</sup>When she opened it, she saw that it was a child, a boy crying. She took pity on it and said, "This must be a Hebrew child." <sup>7</sup>Then his sister said to Pharaoh's daughter, "Shall I go and get you a Hebrew nurse to suckle the child for you?" <sup>8</sup>And Pharaoh's daughter answered, "Yes." So the girl went and called the child's mother. <sup>9</sup>And Pharaoh's daughter said to her, "Take this child and nurse it for me, and I will pay your wages." So the woman took the child and nursed it. <sup>10</sup>When the child grew up, she brought him to Pharaoh's daughter, who made him her son. She named him Moses, explaining, "I drew him out of the water."

The birth of Moses follows the account of terrible decrees imposed by Pharaoh on Israel. R. Evira states that "...due to the acts of righteous women of that same generation Israel was redeemed from Egypt..." (**Sotah 11b**). This statement seems to be no more than a generalization of the Torah narrative. Israel's redemption is made possible by acts (the use of the word *bi-sechar* here) of women whose sense of preserving life, whose commitment to following the Divine moral edict against brutality to other human beings takes precedence over the orders of the King.

Note that R. Evira talks of "women of that same generation". In so doing he makes three points. One is that redemption can be achieved by acting, not merely waiting for it to happen. Secondly, redemption can be a process brought about by acts of the very generation, that is, it is not dependent on "merits of the ancestors" alone, or on some other Divine promise, alone. Third, acts of redemption are not the purview of men alone, nor of Jews alone. He does not specify "righteous Jewish women", but merely "righteous women". **TTT 76 B and E**

He is no doubt referring to the midwives (cf. Ex. 1:15-21) and to Pharaoh's daughter (Ex. 2:5-10). But, in addition he is also referring to Moses' sister Miriam and his mother Yocheved. The midrash of Miriam rebuking her father for sending Yocheved away is well known (**Ex. R. 1:13 et al**). Amram does not want to bring children into a world where males are brutally drowned in the Nile. He thus, divorces his wife, Yocheved. Miriam rebukes him saying that his decree is worse than Pharaoh's, since in the latter's decree the female children are spared. Amram returns Yocheved as his wife, and all of Israel follows suit.

We are then told that Yocheved becomes pregnant and has a child, "she sees that he is good, and she hides him for three months. But she could no longer hide him, so she buys for him a reed basket, and she covers it over with pitch. She places the child in the basket and she places that in the reed pond by the Nile bank." (Ex. 2:2-3) All of the activity to preserve the life of the child is done by her. Her husband is nowhere mentioned. She does not know how to hide him after three months, and comes upon what seems at first to be a desperate idea, to prepare a vessel that could hold the baby if placed in the river. Clearly, she felt that someone would find him, and felt that if that person had any heart they would disobey the king's orders and preserve the life of the child. She makes the decisions, takes the action, and succeeds.

All of her activity is made necessary by Pharaoh's evil decree: "every male child born is to be drowned in the Nile" (Ex. 1:22). Like all such sweeping rules it is harder to implement than one would think. How do you know when children are born? How do you know if the child is male or female? How does one go about taking the child? Surely, to actually carry out such a decree one needs officials, offices for registration, and offices for follow-up. One must have every marriage registered, then follow-up on each couple to check for pregnancy, then come around after 9 months to check what sex the baby is, and bring a company of soldiers to take the child if it is male. In short, this cannot be easily accomplished.

Indeed, one Midrash understands the sequence of verses 2:2-3 as follows: the Egyptians registered the couple as married only from the time of their remarriage! But, according to this Midrash, Yocheved was already three months pregnant with Moses, his having being conceived during their first marriage! Thus this gave her

three months time to successfully hide him, until the officials came around after 9 months to check if she had a son! (**Ex. R. 1:20**)

However, Rashbam interprets the verses in an altogether different way. He relates to verse 2, "she saw that he was good". Many interpret that phrase to mean that she saw something special in Moses, or that a light filled the house when he was born. Rashbam understands it differently. He understands the phrase as parallel in meaning to the phrase used for God who "saw all that He had made and it was good" (Gen. 1:31). Namely, "looked at all of his activities to see if anything needed to be repaired, but saw that they were all viable in themselves" (**Rashbam on Ex. 2:1**). According to Rashbam, Yocheved conceived only after the remarriage, and Moses was born prematurely at 6 months! She saw, however, that he was well formed and had the signs of survival, hair and fingernails (cf. **Yev. 80a-b**). Thus, she hid him for three months, since the Egyptians only checked after nine months.

Imagine a woman hiding, warming and caring for a 6 month premature baby, and seeing that she has succeeded in preserving his life and that at nine months he is a viable child. Imagine the care and the tremendous energy, both spiritual and physical. Think of the constant need to preserve life and act, so that this child would live. It is a testimony to the "acts of righteous women of that same generation". Such acts of devotion to life and care are the secret of Israel's redemption.

**\*Ex. 1, 22**

<sup>22</sup>*Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live."*

The opening chapter of the book of Shemot always chills my blood. The progression through political domination, to enslavement to murder is striking. The culmination of this vicious process is in the last verse: "Then Pharaoh charged all his people, saying, "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile [*kol ha-ben ... ha-yeorah tashlikhuhu*], but let every girl live [*ve-khol ha-bat t'hayun*]" (Ex. 1, 22) .

What is behind the awful asymmetry of Pharaoh's decree? The Torah emphasizes this by NOT making the parallel explicit. If it had, Torah would have written, *kol ha-ben ...tamitu*, "Every boy that is born shall be killed". The circumlocution for killing the boys stands in stark contrast with the explicit word "let live" for the girls.

Some Midrashim see the decree in this way, and connect it up with the history of the Jewish people. R. Pinhas. in the name of R. Hoshaya, interprets Abraham's journey to Egypt as a foretelling of the journey of Israel in Egypt. Just as Abraham left Canaan because of a famine (Gen. 12, 10), so Israel went down to Egypt because of famine (Gen. 45, 6). As to our matter, this Midrash states: "just as Abraham feared "they will kill me and keep you [Sarai] alive" (Gen. 12, 12); so for Israel "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live" (**Gen. R. 40, 16**).

One implication of this is that the Egyptians are a corrupt nation who keep alive the women for purposes of fornication, and kill the men. But, this Midrash goes on to add: "just as Abraham asked Sarah to do him a favor "please say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me" (Gen. 12, 13); so for Israel "and God dealt well with the midwives" (Ex. 1, 20). Abraham is saved by the goodness of Sarah, so Israel's males

are saved by the goodness of women who refuse to carry out Pharaoh's scheme. TTT  
76 E and M

Indeed, one can infer from the comment of Ramban on Gen. 12, 10 that Pharaoh's decree is a kind of punishment: "know that Abraham, our forefather, sinned a great sin, unintentionally, by putting his righteous wife in a position of possible sin because he was afraid that they would kill him. He should have trusted in God to save him and his wife, for God has the power to help and to save." Abraham should have known that some things are so wrong, that one should not do them, even if it might mean sacrifice of one's own life. Indeed, the lesson seems to be that when one gives in to such bad choices, there are long term evil consequences. Still, in the terms of our Midrash, even though the women are saved, it is through their goodness that the men are saved as well.

Another Midrash draws an even more frightening lesson from our verse. "Haman said [to himself] 'what a fool was Pharaoh who said: "Every boy that is born you shall throw into the Nile, but let every girl live", did he not know that the women will get married and produce offspring?', I will not do that, rather I will "destroy, massacre, and exterminate all the Jews, young and old, children and women, on a single day" (Esther 3, 13). This chilling lesson interprets Pharaoh's decree as a mistake, if his goal was to destroy the Jewish people. The Jews should have learned this by themselves, and taken great precautions. By not learning from this lesson, the Jews were exposed to an even greater evil later on.

Still, the imbalance of the decree is not clear. Furthermore, the Hebrew word *t'hayun*, translated here as "let live", seems to not be passive, but active. That is, it should be translated as "will make live". This fits with the Midrash that connects Sarah's helping Abraham to live with the midwives helping the young boys to live. An even stronger reading of the verse in the very same way is found in the Torah commentary of R. Zadok ha-Kohen of Lublin (**Or Zarua la-tzaddik**, 6).

It is almost as if the phrase is not said by Pharaoh, but is an aside from the Holy Spirit: "every son will be thrown into the Nile", and the Holy Spirit says, "BUT the girls will keep them alive". R. Zadok attributes this verse specifically to the daughter of Pharaoh, known as "Batyah", "the daughter of God", who drew Moses out of the Nile. By drawing Moses out of the water, she enables not only the redemption of Israel, but the giving of the Torah to the world. Her name is "ha-bat t'hayun", which is synonymous with "batyah". The will of God is to give and to nurture life, and her actions are in line with that will.

**\*Ex. 3, 1-3**

*Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. <sup>2</sup>An angel of the LORD appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame, yet the bush was not consumed. <sup>3</sup>Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?*

In Memory of Anne Zissenwine ztz"l

One of the more famous scenes in this week's parasha, certainly in our circles, is Moses' sighting of the burning bush. The Torah tells us:

"Now Moses, tending the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian, drove the flock into the wilderness, and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. An angel of the Lord appeared to him in a blazing fire out of a bush. He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame ("bo'er" ba-eish"), yet the bush was not consumed ("ukal"). Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up? (*madua lo yivar ha-sneh*)" (Ex. 3, 1-3)

The "marvelous sight" that Moses sees needs explanation. The Hebrew text is more ambiguous than the English translation. On the one hand the bush is stated to be burning, "bo'er", and on the other hand Moses says that it is not burning ("lo yivar"). Another question about this passage is to whom is Moses speaking, to himself, to the sheep, or are there other people present?

One Midrash offers three explanations of the first question. The first explanation is what most of us understand at first glance. Moses is puzzled by why the bush does not burn in the natural way that most things that are on fire do, namely, they are consumed by the fire. This bush is burning but not being consumed. The second explanation is that the bush is glowing ("mitlahev") but not burning up ("mitakel"). That is, there is a phenomenon of giving off light, glowing, but not by burning as in a fire. This explanation will return in my halakhic digression. Also, since the word "mitlahev" means "enthusiasm" or "excitement", this explanation will return when I discuss the metaphorical meaning of the burning bush.

The third explanation is the most fascinating. The bush that was burning was actually being consumed, but there was another bush growing exactly behind it, and it looked as if the first bush was not being consumed. According to this explanation the whole thing was a great illusion, even better than those of David Copperfield. This explanation explains our other question as well. The point is that there were other shepherds there along with Moses. He says to them that he is going to investigate this wonderful sight, and they do not see it! That is, the quality of Moses here is to be inspired by a wondrous sight. The others are blasé and uncaring. It matters not if the sight is real or an illusion, what is important is that one's curiosity and desire for knowledge is aroused by the sight. For this explanation the bush is a test of Moses' qualities. (**Pesikta Zutrata on Ex. 3, 3) TTT 77 K and B**)

Halakhic digression. R. Shalom Mordecai Shvadron, the great posek of his day, wrote a responsum which allowed the use of electricity on Shabbat for turning on electric lights. Shvadron argues that electricity is not a forbidden act by the Torah since it was unknown in the Tabernacle, and the Torah prohibitions of "work" are based upon what was done in the Tabernacle. He also points out that the prohibition on burning fire does not apply to electricity since the cables carrying the electricity are not burned up. It is, he writes, equivalent to the fire that Moses saw at the burning bush which looked like fire, but did not consume the bush. There is in nature a kind of "higher fire" which is a kind of fire that gives light but does not consume its source. Finally, there is no question of putting out the fire, since the electricity is not "put out" by turning it off, rather it remains in the wires, they are merely disconnected. (**Maharsham II, 247, quoted in Tradition and Change as Maharam (sic) p. 404**)



Even though his opinions were generally accepted, this one was not. The idea that there are different types of energy which can produce flame, even though they are themselves not fire seemed to be too odd to be true. Although Marasham reached this idea based upon his understanding of the burning bush incident in the Torah, and not through any direct knowledge of physics, it is closer to the scientific truth known today than his critics allowed. **TTT 77 HA**

Let us return to the metaphorical meaning of the bush, and the qualities of Moses that were revealed by it. R. Yitzhak Arama sees Moses as a kind of philosopher-scientist in this incident. His curiosity drives him to search out why the bush is not consumed, that is, why it appears to be burning and yet is not consumed. The ability to divide the process into different parts and realize that one part is missing drives Moses to want to investigate, and this drive to investigate leads him to seek the truth. **(Akedat Yitzhak sha'ar 35)**

In addition to the drive to search for the truth by using research, R. Meir Ben Gabbai understands that Moses appreciates the complexity of the situation. The bush stands for a phenomenon which is happening, but NOT in the simple way things usually happen. For something to burn and not to burn up is a complex new issue. It represents Moses' desire to grapple with complex issues, such as how does it happen that something which is totally good can in the long run turn out to be bad. **(Avodat ha-Kodesh 3, 34)**

R. Elimelekh of Lyzhansk continues this line of interpretation by pointing out that the symbol of the bush, which is burning fire, can be understood as referring to fanatic enthusiasm. Such radical enthusiasm is always a threat to consume a person, unless they can control it so that it does not do so.

Indeed, he points to the change of language in our verses: "He gazed, and there was a bush all aflame ("bo'er" ba-eish"), yet the bush was not consumed ("ukal"). Moses said, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn? ("madua lo yivar ha-sneh")" Moses should not have wondered why the bush did not burn, since the Torah specifically says that it WAS burning, but why was it not consumed. Thus the Hebrew should read "madua lo yeukal ha-sneh"? There is, he points out, a big difference between passion, symbolized by burning, and fanatic passion, symbolized by consumption. Particularly the religious person must be aware that overly enthusiastic passion for religion can consume the soul, and one must always be on guard against it. (Noam Elimelekh on our verse) **TTT 78 T and B and K and M**

Thus, the metaphor of the bush refers to Moses himself. What is being symbolized is a type of person who has enormous curiosity, whose sense of wonder is ever present, whose intellectual integrity demands research and to look into things which are clearly complex and seemingly self-contradictory. In addition this person is cautioned to control the passion and enthusiasm which motivates them to act, lest they be consumed by it. It is those qualities which are a good indicator of a truly religious person and of a leader.

**\*Ex. 3, 7**

*"And the Lord continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings."*

The first parasha of Exodus is one of the richest in drama. It spreads out before us the suffering of Israel in Egypt, the longing for salvation, the birth of Moses, who will be the one to bring salvation to Israel. The mission of Moses is announced to him while he is busy at his profession of tending flocks.

God gets Moses' attention, and announces His presence. He then begins to speak of the mission for which Moses has been intended: "And the Lord continued, "I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt and have heeded their outcry because of their taskmasters; yes, I am mindful of their sufferings." (Ex. 3, 7) The word, which is translated here as "plight", is the Hebrew word *awni*. This word is commonly used to refer to poverty, or economic distress, and the word is found in the general meaning of "distress".

The same word is used by God in the continuation of this speech to Moses: "and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex. 3, 17) . In this verse, the Hebrew word *awni* is translated as "misery." The overtone of "economic misery" is clearer in this verse, since the contrast is with the poor status and economic well-being of Israel in Egypt, as against what it will be in a plentiful land, a land "flowing with milk and honey."

Now all of this seems to be fairly clear and obvious, and the only thing that attracted my interest was why is the land of Israel described as "the land of the Canaanites... etc."? God starts out speaking to Moses as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and this identity recurs over and over in this speech. Indeed, if anything the legitimacy of God's intervention here is based in chapter 3 on the historical relationship with the ancestors of the Israelites. So, why is the land not referred to as "the land promised to Abraham... etc."?

One Midrash creates a connection between God's appearance to Abraham (Gen. 12), and God's speech to Moses. This midrash notes: "[God said] to Abraham "go forth" ("lekh lekha"), and to his descendants [God said] "and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.'" (Ex. 3, 17)". (**Tanhuma, Lekh Lekha, 9**). Now the intention of the Midrash is to show that there is an historical congruence between God's appearance to Abraham and to Israel in Egypt. Yet, I am troubled by the dissimilarities of this analogy. Abraham is to "go forth", to a land which God says is to be his. He has to take action, and he understands that the land is meant for him, with no mention of any other nation in relation to this land. But, in the case of Israel in Egypt, God is the actor. The people are being taken out by God, and the land clearly is identified with other nations who live there!

Furthermore, there is no hint that Abraham is in any misery or economic distress. He is asked to go from what is presumably a comfortable and cultured place. Whereas, with Israel in Egypt it is emphasized that the people are in economic distress and are

suffering miserably. Perhaps, one could understand that these are two DIFFERENT approaches to coming into the land of Israel. Abraham would be more like those who come to Israel from comfortable western countries, and whose only reason for Aliyah would be a sense of feeling that it is “meant for them”, it is like “coming home”. Whereas, Israel in Exodus is more like those who come to Israel without identifying it as “theirs”, who may even see the land, at first, as connected with other nations, but they come out of a terrible need, out of distress.

So, as I was thinking about this, I began to wonder why the fact of Israel’s distress, their impoverishment, was mentioned altogether. Clearly slaves are not going to be a happy lot. If the nation of Israel is meant to reside in the land of Israel, and God had promised it to them, why couch their exodus in terms of the need to escape misery at all?! God could merely have said to Moses something like: “I am the God of your ancestors, etc. I promised this land to them, and now is the time for them to claim their inheritance.” In short, is there a NEED for the enslavement and suffering of Israel in order for God to take them into the land? That is the sense I was getting from the Midrash and the story.

I found an explanation which saw the Exodus story in that fashion. Joseph Albo, in his *Sefer ha-Ikkarim* writes (translation mine):

“The prophets and the righteous, such as Elijah and R. Hanina b. Dosa, spurned the materiel rewards of this world, because those rewards always fluctuated, and had nothing permanent about them. For this reason, they always worried about achieving spiritual goodness which nourishes the soul, and is everlasting. And they chose to suffer in this world in favor of achieving spiritual rewards, for they knew that the spiritual reward follows upon suffering... for being cannot exist except only after loss, and loss can only be after existence. Similarly, joy can only come after sadness, and eminence only after degradation, and it is for this reason you find that when Israel was in Egypt at the lowest point of degradation, just then God caused them to achieve preeminence, and thus the verse says “I have marked well the plight of My people in Egypt” (Ex. 3, 7) and “and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites” (Ex. 3, 17). For this is the way of nature, that being only derives from loss, just as the chick only comes into being after the form of the egg has been lost, and the plant exists only with the loss of the seed, and similarly, national salvation only exists after the nation has been at a low point of misery and pessimism, which is like loss.” (*Sefer ha-Ikkarim*, 4, 51) **TTT 79 T and B and K and M**

Albo contends that history had to work the way it did, otherwise there could be no salvation. He believes that there is some “natural process” at work here, and he quotes Isa. 61:11 as proof: “For as the earth brings forth her growth, And a garden makes the seed shoot up, So the Lord God will make Victory and renown shoot up In the presence of all the nations.” The natural process of the rotting of the seed to produce plants, applies to national redemption. The nation must rot away, as it were, in order for it to grow to prominence and renown again.

Aside from Albo’s solution to the problem of the chicken and the egg, I find this section very disturbing. He seems to apply a coating of “historical inevitability” to the stories, and ignores the role of human actions, albeit actions inspired by adherence to Divine principles. Perhaps, if a nation has lost contact with its past, and

the spiritual heroes of the nation are unknown to the masses, then a leader, such as Moses, can appeal only to immediate material interests in order to sway the people. But, there is nothing inevitable or no “natural law” about that. Loss of continuity with the texts, language and customs of the nations spiritual and cultural heritage can bring about great spiritual despair and misery, it is indeed “awni”, a kind of poverty, but there is nothing inevitable about this. If anything, Albo’s explanation reinforces our commitment to teaching and living the Jewish tradition in a way that will inspire those Jews who have lost contact to reaffirm their connection. Those who feel a spiritual poverty in their lives, can redeem the wisdom and heart of Jewish tradition by acting and making it their own.

**\*Ex. 3, 16-18**

*<sup>16</sup>“Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, ‘I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt, <sup>17</sup>and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey.’ <sup>18</sup>They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God.’*

The episode of God’s revelation to Moses is one of the most compelling in the Exodus narrative. God speaks to Moses out of a lowly bush, and tells him to return to Egypt and confront Pharaoh in order to demand that he release Israel from serving him. Moses demurs, and for each demur God has an answer. At one point God tells Moses:

“Go and assemble the elders of Israel and say to them: the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, has appeared to me and said, ‘I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt, and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt... They will listen to you; then you shall go with the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and you shall say to him, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, manifested Himself to us. Now therefore, let us go a distance of three days into the wilderness to sacrifice to the LORD our God.’” (Ex. 3:16-18)

Moses continues to demur, and later on in this lengthy and involved conversation the following exchange takes place:

“But Moses spoke up and said, “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The LORD did not appear to you?” The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” And he replied, “A rod.” He said, “Cast it on the ground.” He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. Then the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail” —he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand —“that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.”

The LORD said to him further, “Put your hand into your bosom.” He put his hand into his bosom; and when he took it out, his hand was encrusted with snowy scales! And He said, “Put your hand back into your bosom.” —He put his hand back into his bosom; and when he took it out of his bosom, there it was again like the rest of his

body. – “And if they do not believe you or pay heed to the first sign, they will believe the second. And if they are not convinced by both these signs and still do not heed you, take some water from the Nile and pour it on the dry ground, and it – the water that you take from the Nile – will turn to blood on the dry ground.” (Ex. 4:1-9)

Why does God give Moses three signs? Why does Moses need the signs at all? God has told him that “they will listen to him” (3:18), how is it that Moses replies later on “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me...?” What is a sign? What do these signs signify?

There are so many exegetical questions which arise from this passage, that it has spawned numerous responses. One of the trends in the explication of this passage is to concentrate on the signs (Heb. Ot), and the need for them. One Midrashic tradition clearly sees Moses as sinning by expressing his doubt about Israel listening to him. After all, God had told him specifically that they would listen to him! To express the opposite view publicly is to engage in slander towards Israel, lashon ha-ra (cf. **Ex. R. 3, 12**). The signs are seen as punishments for Moshe, particularly the snowy hand of leprosy, which according to the tradition is the Divine punishment for lashon ha-ra.

According to this school of thought, those signs were only meant for Moses in the wilderness, and were not done for the people of Israel in Egypt. (cf. **Yalkut Shimoni Shemot 171; Maharal Sefer Gevurot ha-Shem, p. 111**). Indeed the Hebrew expression “kol ha-ot”, literally the “voice of the sign”, is explained in these accounts by assuming that Moses does not actually DO the first two signs before Israel, but merely tells them about it. Yalkut Shimoni makes the telling itself into a sign, by saying that Moses’ rod receives the gift of speech and talks to Israel saying what happened to it.

Ramban, however, takes an approach which is most striking. He wonders if there is a way to explain Moses’ seeming simple lack of faith in what God has already told him, thus turning it from a sin into a genuine grappling with a real problem. He cites Ibn Ezra’s comment that God told Moses in chapter 3 that the elders would listen to him, but did not say anything about the people! But, Ramban rejects this view. He attempts to grapple with the thorny issue of what the statements by God mean in terms of reality.

**Ramban** says: “... it could be that when God says “they will listen to you” that this is not a promise [of what will actually occur] but it is an expression of what God wants to be [literally a “will”], “they will listen to you”, it is proper for them to listen to you...” Ramban then gives other examples from the Bible where God’s saying that something will happen is NOT a guarantee that it happens, but, in his words, an expression of what SHOULD happen, what God wants to happen, or what is fitting that should happen. Clearly, Ramban is taking into account human freedom in all of these citations. They all have to do with whether or not people will believe in God, and in God’s words. That is up to them in the end, and God can express what will happen only in terms of what God prefers will happen, but it is not a foretelling of a future reality, even though it is God who is uttering it! **TTT 80 T and B**

Ramban seems to be startled by this bold thought, and thus immediately offers another explanation. He says that Moses’s expression of doubt is not about the

people listening to him about going to Pharaoh, but arises because of the continuation (3:18ff) in which God announces that Pharaoh will NOT agree to let them go, and Moses is asking what will happen then!? The people will go along at the beginning because, as Ramban puts it, “what do they have to lose”, but if their request is rebuffed, then it can look as if Moses had made a mistake. It is one thing for Israel to believe Moses, it is another thing for Pharaoh to believe Moses.

The need for signs to reinforce belief is quite common, but when we view Ramban’s approach, we realize that despite any possible signs the depth and commitment of belief depends on the individual alone.

**\*Ex. 4, 1-5**

*But Moses spoke up and said, “What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The LORD did not appear to you?” <sup>2</sup>The LORD said to him, “What is that in your hand?” And he replied, “A rod.” <sup>3</sup>He said, “Cast it on the ground.” He cast it on the ground and it became a snake; and Moses recoiled from it. <sup>4</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, “Put out your hand and grasp it by the tail” – he put out his hand and seized it, and it became a rod in his hand – <sup>5</sup>“that they may believe that the LORD, the God of their fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, did appear to you.”*

One of the main elements of the story of the Exodus from Egypt is “the rod”, a piece of wood. Indeed, we first encounter the rod when God is revealed to Moses at the burning bush. Moses, in a very rational way, is not sure that he has really heard God talking to him, at least he finds it very hard to understand what he is experiencing.

In this conversation, in which Moses seems to be trying to work out what is happening to him, he asks God: ““What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me, but say: The Lord did not appear to you?”” (Ex. 4, 1) God, appropriate for a Jewish story, answer the question with a question: The Lord said to him, “What is that in your hand?” And he replied, “A rod.”” (Ex. 4, 2) Presumably this rod is a shepherd’s staff which Moses uses in herding Jethro’s sheep. We all know the continuation. God answers Moses question of doubt by producing a miracle, namely, the rod turns into a snake, and then into a rod again.

Now, one might question the logical validity of answering a question of doubt about faith with a supernatural miracle. Indeed, in the story the rod to snake trick does NOT immediately remove all doubt from Moses. Moses does not jump up and say, “oh, yes, now I see, I am on my way back to Egypt.” He continues arguing with God about fulfilling the mission on which God has come to send him. Note that despite the lack of immediate response by Moses to the rod, it is slated to be the way in which Moses will convince Israel that God really did talk to him. (Ex. 4, 5) God presumably notes that the rod did not do the trick so well, so God has another miracle for Moses, namely, his hand turns leprous, and returns to health. (Ex. 4, 6ff.)

In any case, the one thing which seems to connect Moses to God, and to God’s power, the anchor of Moses’ faithfulness to his mission is the rod. He takes it with him, and it is the instrument he uses to perform “signs and wonders” in the land of Egypt. It is the weapon, the only physical weapon, with which Moses, the army of one, or two if we include Aaron, is supplied to carry out the campaign against Pharaoh. Indeed, Moses’ staff is called “the rod of God”. (Ex. 4, 20)

In this week's parasha Moses and Aaron appear before Pharaoh, and in a scene well remembered from all the movies about the exodus: "So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the Lord had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same with their spells; each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed their rods. (Ex. 7, 10-12)

Wait a minute! Here it is Aaron's rod. Does Aaron ALSO have a rod with supernatural powers? If that is so, what happened to Moses' rod, the one with which he was told by God to use to perform the signs? Whose rod is it, God's, Moses' or Aaron's? Furthermore, while our English translation has the rod in chapter 7 turn into a "serpent", the Hebrew word is "tanin" which usually refers to a crocodile, whereas at the bush the rod turned into a "snake", in Hebrew a "nahash".

These difficulties are noted by the commentators. **Ibn Ezra**, says clearly that there is only one rod. Aaron's rod is simply the same rod of Moses, which he gave to Aaron to perform the sign. (**on Ex. 7, 9**) Ibn Ezra explains that the rod belonged to Moses. It is called "the rod of God" because it was the instrument which God used to show His power. Since it physically was changed by God, it is in a sense "God's". But, it is the same rod that was Moses' and he hands it over to Aaron whenever it is Aaron's role to perform a sign or a wonder. (**on Ex. 4, 20**)

I find fascinating the notion that something, or someone, who is transformed by God is different after the fact. In a sense that object or person is "of God". But, what is even more important is that "being of God" implies sharing. Perhaps that is at the basis of those who become rabbis out of a sense of mission, it leads to sharing. But, the same is true for anyone truly touched by God. It cannot be otherwise than sharing, for if not, then it is probably not "from God". **TTT 81 T**

As to the second difficulty, **Ramban** notes that the sign here is not for Moses or for the Israelites, but rather for Pharaoh. Thus, the rod turns into a crocodile, one of the main symbols of ancient Egypt, and of Pharaoh (cf. Ezek. 29, 3). Ramban says that the message to Pharaoh, who is symbolized by the crocodile, is clear, God controls you, and will cause you to give in to the agents of God on behalf of Israel.

One Midrash sees something else going on. If the crocodile produced by Aaron merely swallowed the crocodiles produced by the Egyptians, that would be a natural thing. Nothing special about that, large crocodiles swallow smaller ones all the time. So, it must return to its origin, that is, a rod again, and the ROD swallows the others, and that is what the verse says! Rabbi Elazar calls it "a miracle within a miracle". Presumably, he means that the change from rod to crocodile and back again is one miracle, and the fact that the rod swallowed the others was another miracle. (**Ex. R. 9, 9**)

I find this idea, and the expression of R. Elazar, even more fascinating. Once someone is able to acknowledge the miraculous, this allows the expansion of the sense of miracle to other things. Our rabbi, my teacher, Rabbi A. J. Heschel talked

much about the sense of the ineffable that was the basis of religious life. The sense of the ineffable is truly the basis of sensing the miraculous.

Our daily prayer, Modim, opens us up to the ineffable in our life by focusing our attention on the daily miracles that are ever with us. Our Midrash explains that the miraculous can only become part of our life by seeing one specific thing that way. In order to become religious we need “the miracle within the miracle”. In the Modim prayer this means the acknowledgement of the miracle in the mere fact of existence, which in turn lets us see the further miracle of the glory of being in all creatures. (cf. my accompanying essay on Modim and Shalom.) **TTT 81 T**

That is why there are two miracles at the bush. One is the miracle of the rod. But, Moses only really responds after the second miracle, the healing of his hand. Once we allow for change, once we begin to have faith that the way a thing is may not be determined solely by its physical properties, that a rod may become more than a mere rod, then we can go to the next step, and focus our faith on healing, healing ourselves and others. Once Moses accepts the transforming power of God, he can begin to think that he can help others, relieve suffering, or make sure that justice is done.

This Midrash continues in a striking way. When Pharaoh saw that the rod swallowed all the others, he panicked. He said to himself: “What will I do, if he says to the rod ‘swallow Pharaoh and his throne’ I will go down its gullet.”

Pharaoh has no sense of the ineffable, nor any sense of the miracle of life. At least, no sense that the miracle of life includes within itself another miracle, that of compassion for life. Pharaoh can only see the godly as power, as control over life. His idea of imitating God is to kill people or to enslave them. That way of looking at God and at others is a way that cannot triumph; in the end, it will be swallowed up by the miracle within the miracle, the miracle of life that breeds the miracle of compassion and mercy.

Perhaps this Midrash is a hopeful view of the struggle between those for whom aggressive control of others is the sign of authority, versus those for whom authority requires compassion and responsibility for the welfare of others. Even a Pharaoh can potentially understand that his way may be wrong. But, still and all, to reach that understanding requires being open to the “miracle within the miracle”. How to bring people to that openness so that they can approach that awareness is the challenge of any religious leader, and any religious system. **TTT 81 M**

This process is beautifully spelled out in the Talmud (**Shabbat 97a**), where Moses is criticized for maligning innocent Jews. For, when God tells Moses to return to the people, Moses asks: “but what if they will not believe me?” The Talmud here has God rebuke Moses. “Israel are believers and the offspring of believers, but you Moses will end up rejecting belief.” This is proved by referring to verses where Israel shows belief (Ex. 4, 31), and where Abraham is praised for his belief (Gen. 15, 6); together with the verse in which Moses is forbidden to enter the Land of Israel, because he did not believe (Num. 20, 12).

The Talmud asks how Moses was punished for this lack of belief? The answer is that his hand was made leprous. But, then, the Talmud wonders, what about his hand



being made healthy again? The answer is that he did not see that his hand was ill until it was completely out of his coat, but the healing began even before he removed his hand from his coat. That is, the quality of mercy is faster and stronger than the quality of violence. That is to say, like the rod it is "a miracle within a miracle".

**\*Ex. 5, 4-12**

*<sup>4</sup>But the king of Egypt said to them, "Moses and Aaron, why do you distract the people from their tasks? Get to your labors!" <sup>5</sup>And Pharaoh continued, "The people of the land are already so numerous, and you would have them cease from their labors!"*

*<sup>6</sup>That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, <sup>7</sup>"You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. <sup>8</sup>But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God!' <sup>9</sup>Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises."*

*<sup>10</sup>So the taskmasters and foremen of the people went out and said to the people, "Thus says Pharaoh: I will not give you any straw. <sup>11</sup>You must go and get the straw yourselves wherever you can find it; but there shall be no decrease whatever in your work." <sup>12</sup>Then the people scattered throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw.*

At the end of this week's parasha, Moses approaches Pharaoh with God's request to set Israel free from bondage. Pharaoh's response is familiar. He reacts like a wealthy autocratic ruler, who has no interest in those members of his society who are doing menial labor. He sees them as "milking" the state, perhaps as recipients of welfare, that is, they are fed and housed for the small amount of manual work they do for the state. He condemns them as "lazy", and he condemns Moses and Aaron as if they are labor organizers. "Why do you put such ideas into their heads", he cries at them. (cf. Ex. 5, 4-5)

The reader knows that Pharaoh wants more than mere subjugation. Thus, his reaction includes a kind of retribution for the perceived laziness of the people. That is, he makes it harder for them to work. Since their work is to make bricks, and straw is needed for that work, from now on they will have to collect the straw as well as make the bricks. That is, the straw will no longer be delivered to them. The Torah describes the result of this cruel change in work conditions: "Then the people scattered ["va-yawfetz ha-am"] throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw." (Ex. 5, 12)

This decree of Pharaoh is certainly not an efficient way to make bricks, as Nehamah Leibowitz used to point out. It is clear that there is a punitive intent. But, what exactly is this verse describing? The Hebrew words "va-yawfetz ha-am" are difficult. Our JPS translation, "then the people scattered", implies that the people, on their own, start roaming throughout the land of Egypt to look for straw. It is an amazing picture to imagine, bands of slaves roaming up and down this large country gathering straw and carrying it all the way back to Goshen to the brick factories. Or, are they forcibly scattered and made to roam the country?

In grammatical terms, is the verb "va-yawfetz" transitive or active? **Ibn Ezra** thinks it is the former (**short on Ex. 5, 12**) and **Radak** thinks it is the latter (**on I Sam. 13, 8**). Yalkut Shimoni contains a Midrash which understands Pharaoh's anger. The tribe of

Levi maintained its clergy status and somehow kept itself disengaged from physical labor in order to serve the "religious needs" of Israel. Pharaoh, seeing this, accuses them all of having too much time on their hands. Furthermore, they [Levites?] read texts to the people from Shabbat to Shabbat; texts which promised deliverance by the Lord. Pharaoh's reaction is that the workload must be made harder. (**YK Shemot 176**) According to this, when leadership, particularly clergy, is not involved with the same hardships as the people the oppressors become harsher in their desire to suppress the nation. It seems clear that Pharaoh is the evil one here, yet the moral responsibility of the leadership is part of the equation.

Still, the main source of fascination for me in this tale is the sense that measures taken by those in power to subjugate people begin processes which may end up thoroughly evil. More importantly, this lesson is the same for all governments, not only evil dictatorships. This way of generalizing Pharaoh's measures becomes clear in an astounding Midrash on the admonitions which the Torah lays out for Israelite kings. One of these cautionary laws is: "Moreover, he shall not keep many horses or send people back to Egypt to add to his horses, since the Lord has warned you, You must not go back that way again." (Deut. 17, 16) The Midrash is puzzled by the proximity of the king keeping many horses and his returning Israel to the subjugation of Egypt. The verse implies that one leads to the other. Howso?

The answer is revealed by the Midrashic method of showing linguistic similarity between two passages. As to the slavery of Egypt it is written: "Then the people scattered ["va-yawfetz ha-am"] throughout the land of Egypt to gather stubble for straw." As to the horses of the king it is written: "barley and straw for the horses and the swift steeds" (I Kings 5, 8). The straw gives away the connection. Making people scatter and search for straw to satisfy the king's sense of his own greatness is the sign of internal corruption of governments. In modern terms, when a government becomes inflated by its own importance, and it takes advantage of those least able to resist it in order to feed its own schemes of grandeur, it is "going back the way of Egypt". The king is forbidden to invest in too many horses, the outward symbol of a king's status, because that will require an enormous utilization of human resources for sole purpose of caring for the horses. Such a use of a work force is "the way" of Egypt, and it matters not that the ruler is a fellow Israelite. (**Midrash Tannaim on Deut. 17, 16**) **TTT 81 M**

Furthermore, the insidious arrogance of those in power filters down to the established members of society, and they, in turn, abuse the downtrodden. When the plagues began, the Egyptians were murmuring "Pharaoh sins and we are afflicted?" But, then Pharaoh scattered the Israelites around Egypt to gather straw, and each Egyptian saw them come onto their property to find straw, and each Egyptian was incensed at this, and struck the Israelites breaking their bones. This Midrash spells out how the misdeeds of the ruling class are easily adopted by others. It understands the Hebrew "va-yawfetz", not as "scattered", but as "were broken", because the same root can be used to speak of broken objects, including broken bones. Since they all become guilty towards the Israelites, the plagues are justified striking all Egyptians. (**Ex. R. 5, 19**)

Finally, the tragic consequences of this process climax in the heart rending story of Rachel the daughter of the son of Tushelah. The nation is scattered gathering straw,

and the stiff stubble of straw pierces their skin causing bleeding sores. Rachel is pregnant, and because of the hard forced labor her baby comes out while she is tramping through the straw. The baby is cut up among the straw, and its blood mingles with the straw that is put into bricks. At that point, the angel Michael, carries the brick up to God, and it was that night that God struck down all of the first born of Egypt. (**Yalkut Shimoni Shemot 176**)

The complete trampling of human dignity, of justice, of compassion towards the poor spreads out and engulfs the whole society. What begins as a delusion of grandeur, as an arrogant complex of control over peoples' lives, cannot be contained. It infects all of society, even those who think that they are immune to poverty and wretchedness. The process that begins with economic oppression, continues to degradation, and ends up cheapening life so much that all life in society becomes devalued. The process is frightening, and yet the analysis of it is so clear in the Torah and these Midrashic passages that it behooves us to take it in well.

**\*Ex. 5:8-9**

*... Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises. [ve-al yishu' be-divrei shahker]"*

By the end of this week's parasha, after Moses and Aaron have come before Pharaoh with their demands, Pharaoh decides to teach the people a lesson. He wants to make them suffer so that Moses and Aaron will lose all credibility as leaders, and so that the people will meekly accept the conditions of slavery to which they are being subjected. He tries to achieve these goals by making the burden of work harder. We read: "That same day Pharaoh charged the taskmasters and foremen of the people, saying, "You shall no longer provide the people with straw for making bricks as heretofore; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But impose upon them the same quota of bricks as they have been making heretofore; do not reduce it, for they are shirkers; that is why they cry, 'Let us go and sacrifice to our God!' Let heavier work be laid upon the men; let them keep at it and not pay attention to deceitful promises. [ve-al yishu' be-divrei shahker]" (Ex. 5:6-9)

Pharaoh wants the people to know that it is he who controls their lives. They should not "pay attention to deceitful promises. [ve-al yishu' be-divrei shahker]". According to this translation, Pharaoh wants the people to see Moses and Aaron as rabble rousers who make promises which they cannot keep. They cannot keep their promises because Pharaoh is the one in charge, and he does not agree to fulfill those promises.

The Hebrew phrase, however, is difficult. The translation already assumes a particular interpretation of unclear Hebrew. The literal translation is not "promises", but "words which are lies". So, the first question is "which lies"? The second problem with the Hebrew phrase is that the word "yishu'", translated here as "pay attention", may have other meanings. Finally, the syntax of the phrase is unusual, where the connection "be" is used, "be-divrei shahker".

Rashi points out that one *\*might think\** that one cannot use the "be" as a prefix for words, as seems to be the usage in our verse. One might think that one cannot say to engage in or contemplate words using "be", rather the usage should be "el" or "le".

To listen "to" untrue words. But, Rashi points out that such usage is actually found ONLY in relation to words. He cites as examples, Numbers 12:1, "va-tedabber ... be-Moshe", "Miriam and Aaron spoke against Moses"; and Zecharia 4:1, "ha-mala'akh ha-dover bi", "The angel who talked with me".

Rashi interprets the phrase as: "they should not discuss and think about spiritual matters, namely, we will go forth and sacrifice to God." (**Rashi on Ex. 5:9**) Rashi says that the verb "yishu" can mean to be engaged in spiritual or religious pursuits. He cites, among others, Psalms 119:117, "I will always muse upon Your laws" ("ve-eshah va-hukekha tamid"). That is, the Hebrew word means to "engage" (Rashi: "mitasek") in Torah study or worship. According to this reading the real intent of Pharaoh's decree was not to disrupt allegiance to Moses and Aaron, but to squelch any spiritual or religious hopes. The people could be enslaved only if their desire to worship God was squashed.

This approach fits in well with a wonderful Midrash which appears in Exodus Rabbah. According to this Midrash the people had books, or scrolls, which they read for their spiritual enjoyment on each Shabbat, for they rested on Shabbat. In this Midrash [**Ex. R. 5:5 ed. Shina'an**] the Hebrew word "yishu" is connected with the word "sha'ashua", which means joy. In Psalm 119, this verb occurs in connection with the study of Torah: "Were not Your teaching my delight" (v. 92, cf. **Midrash Tehillim, 119:38**). The Torah taught them to expect God's help and deliverance.

This Midrash adds to our understanding of Pharaoh's decree. It was not only intended to stop religious activity, but specifically to increase the amount of labor so that there would be NO resting on Shabbat. This meant that there would be no time for Torah study, nor for engaging in any activity which spiritually prepared an individual for personal redemption. Pharaoh understood that without worship, without Shabbat, and without Torah study, the Jews could not continue to survive. By making their "work", read servitude to Pharaoh, all consuming, they had no time for any development of a religious or spiritual dimension to their lives. It was the best way to rule over them. These qualities still, in our day, provide an individual with personal freedom and with a route for personal redemption.

**\*Ex. 5, 22-23**

*"Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people."*

How does one react to tragedy? In this week's parasha of Shmot, we meet Moses. Moses is a two-time refugee, torn away from his birth home, and fleeing from his adopted home. He is a middle-class shepherd with a family, and all of a sudden, against his will, he is thrust into the role of savior for his own people. What seems to support his project is his sense of God's power which is available to him. It is the ultimate backup to any sense of failure that Moses might have about achieving the goals of his mission.

And yet, God's power, while obvious in that walking staffs turn into snakes and all that, does not bend Pharaoh's mind about letting the people go. On the contrary, Pharaoh is annoyed at the suggestion that he grants his slaves a paid vacation, and

he makes their work even harder. The Israelite foremen are charged with implementing the harsh work orders. They are furious at Moses and Aaron for stirring up trouble. They berate them for supplying Pharaoh with ammunition to make their lot worse. (Ex. 5, 15-21)

Moses is crushed, disappointed in God's aloofness which leaves him alone facing a suffering nation with no real answer to their pleas. He turns to God in an angry outburst: "Then Moses returned to the Lord and said, "O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people." (Ex. 5, 22-23) God is not living up to what Moses expects of God, to the words that Moses heard God say to him "I have taken note of you and of what is being done to you in Egypt, and I have declared: I will take you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, .... to a land flowing with milk and honey.'" (Ex. 3, 16-17)

What lies behind Moses' fury? Has he lost faith in God, or in God's ability to heal wounds? Ibn Ezra is bothered by Moses' anger against God, for God had already told him "I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go" (Ex. 3, 19). He also knows that only after all of the signs and portents from God are finished will Israel be let free. So, why is he angry now, when the whole process has just begun? **Ibn Ezra's** answer is that Moses was sure that once he spoke to Pharaoh, that it would ease the Israelite's burden. At least in their own minds they would perceive that Moses with God's help will secure their release. But, now when their burden is increased, and the harsh words of the foremen show that Israel is not comforted by Moses' appearance, he is struck by hopelessness and anger. (**on Ex. 5, 22 short commentary**)

**Ramban** disagrees with Ibn Ezra. He believes that Moses understood very well that Pharaoh would not let the people go right away until all of the plagues had occurred. What Moses did think, however, was that all of this would happen very quickly. The plagues would come one after another, and the nation would be set free right away. But, when Moses began to see that this was going to be a long drawn out process, he lost patience. Even though he believed, in some way, that God would save Israel, he wanted it to be right now. It was his inability to wait, because he was torn by the suffering of the people, that caused him to rant against God at this point. (**on Ex. 5, 22**)

There are some people who hold God to blame when their firm belief in what they think God has promised them fails to materialize. It is, in a sense, a loss of faith when expectations don't work out. There are other people who blame God, but not because they have lost faith, rather it is because they are impatient, and expect that what they are convinced will happen will be swift and all at once. This is true, for example, with people who are suddenly forced into a severe illness. Some begin to question the whole enterprise of their life, and others, while maintaining a belief or hope in their recovery, feel that God has struck them because they are not recovering immediately.

In the Talmud this incident appears in the context of a story told by R. Elazar the son of R. Yose, who found himself in Alexandria. He met there an old Egyptian who boasted about what his people had done to R. Elazar's people. They had drowned

them, killed them with swords, and crushed them under buildings. The Midrash here reacts that it is precisely these tragedies which led to Moses' being reprimanded by God. Because when Moses saw that these horrors were the result of his appearing before Pharaoh he burst out with our verses.

The Midrash goes on to tell how God berated Moses for his reaction:

"Thereupon the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, 'Alas for those who are gone and no more to be found! For how many times did I reveal Myself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob by the name of El Shaddai, and they did not question my character, nor say to Me, 'What is Thy name'? I said to Abraham, 'Arise, walk through the land in the length of it, and in the breadth of it,' for I will give it unto thee': yet when he sought a place to bury Sarah, he did not find one, but had to purchase it for four hundred silver shekels; and still he did not question My character. I said to Isaac, 'Sojourn in this land, and I will be with thee, and will bless thee': yet his servants sought water to drink, and did not find it without its being disputed, as it is said, 'And the herdmen of Gerar did strive with Isaac's herdmen saying, The water is our's'; still he did not question My character. I said to Jacob, The land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed': yet he sought a place to pitch his tent and did not find one until he purchased it for an hundred kesitah; nevertheless he did not question My character; nor did they say to me, What is Thy name? ..." (**San. 111a**)

God disappointed all of the Patriarchs in that the promise was never manifested completely in their lives. Yet, because they had not given up on the promise, they took actions that moved the fulfillment of the promise forward, and showed that they retained their faith. The message for Moses is clear. Tragedies happen, and dreams of perfect outcomes are delayed and frustrated, yet in the end people can act on the dream. In the end people have the power to respond and even to mold the outcome if they don't sit around and complain, but actually do something to prevent the dream from dissipating. **TTT 82 T**

Finally, another Midrash justifies Moses' reaction. When Moses cried out against God, the Divine quality of justice wanted to strike him down as would be befitting for such blasphemy. This was because, according to R. Ishmael, Moses meant his statement as a declaration of God's failure to save his people. But, R. Akiba held that Moses still believed that God would eventually save them, but "what concern is it of Yours that people are crushed beneath buildings?". Moses did not believe that God would fail his people forever, but he was angry that in the meantime there was great loss and tragedy which God seemed to not care about. So, when Justice wanted to strike Moses down, God intervened since God knew that Moses was deeply moved by the suffering of the Israelites. (**Ex. R. 5, 22**)

This Midrash justifies Moses' outburst, because it was NOT selfish, but rather empathy with tragedy. Moses was not concerned with his own suffering, but with the tragedy of others. One can express anger at God, if the motive is sincere sorrow and compassion for those who are suffering.

**\*Ex. 6, 1**

*Then the LORD said to Moses, "You shall soon see what I will do to Pharaoh: he shall let them go because of a greater might; indeed, because of a greater might he shall drive them from his land."*

Moses feels a bitter sense of failure and abandonment. God has sent him to free Israel from slavery, and yet, his appearance before Pharaoh has failed to achieve that goal. Indeed, Pharaoh has only worsened the conditions of work. "Moses turns to God saying: 'Lord why have you made it so bad for this people, why have you sent me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name he has made it worse for this people, and You have not saved Your people!'" (Ex. 5:22-23). God responds to Moses by saying: "...now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh..." (Ex. 6:1).

The Midrash tries to understand Moses' outburst of frustration and God's calm response (**Ex. R. 5 (Shinaan)**). The Midrash points out that the usual behavior is that if someone attacks another person for doing something they think is wrong, that person becomes angry and lashes back. In this case Moses attacks God saying "why did you make it worse?", and yet God calmly answers him saying 'don't worry, everything will be all right'. The Midrash assumes that Moses was not just lashing out at God, but was presenting reasoned arguments against what seems to be His lack of performance.

"I took Genesis and read it through and through, and I saw the deeds of the generation of the flood and how they were judged and that Divine justice (middat ha-din) was apparent; and I saw the deeds of the generation of the tower of Babel and of Sodom and how they were judged and that Divine justice (middat ha-din) was apparent. What did this nation do that was as bad as those, that they should be so cruelly subjugated?" The first thing that bothers Moses is that Israel's suffering seems to be out of proportion. He assumes that this slavery is Divine justice (middat ha-din) meting out of punishment for sinful behavior. On that criteria, Israel should not be enslaved. Divine justice (middat ha-din) is NOT apparent here, when compared with how it looked in Genesis.

"If it is because Abraham, our ancestor, said: "how shall I know that I will inherit the land" (Gen. 15:8), and You told him: "you should surely know that your offspring will be strangers in a foreign land and they will be enslaved and subjugated..." (Gen. 15:13), so Esau and Ishmael are also Abraham's offspring, and they should be subjugated like Israel, and if so, the generation of Isaac or Jacob should have been enslaved, why this nation in my generation?" Moses now argues that if the enslavement is not a punishment for sin, but rather part of a Divine plan, why does the difficult and onerous part of the plan happen in this generation and to these people? Why is this particular enslavement worse than anything which had proceeded it? Why do not others, part of the same plan, share the suffering with this generation?

Moses' claims against the Divine fall into two categories: one is the apparent lack of justice in the world, and the other is a questioning of the process which leads to a happy final outcome. Moses is asking is it really necessary for Israel to suffer so much now, just so they can become a free and independent people in order to receive God's Torah and inherit the Land of Israel?

Perhaps God really is annoyed or even angry by Moses' implied criticism, so the Midrash ends: "and if You say: "why do you care so much?" [I reply] "why [for what purpose] have you sent me" (5:23) These questions have to be asked! One who

accepts the nation's enslavement without questioning God's justice or His rule of history, is NOT doing the job. We cannot always, if ever, make sense out of the workings of history. However, we have goals and ideals towards which we strive, even when conditions seem to make achieving those goals impossible. For example, we wish to maintain Jewish identity and religious practice, even when we seem to be struggling against forces of assimilation that make it very difficult to do so. So our task, is to ask the questions, and at the same time continue to strive to fulfill our ideals. **TTT 82 T**



God replies to Moses' accusation of failure by recounting how He had protected the patriarchs of Israel, and reassuring Moses that He will save them as promised. God also reveals to Moses that this will be a lengthy and difficult process with the need for great force to convince Pharaoh to let Israel go. Then a summary is given of those involved in Israel's leadership including the family history of Moses and Aaron. The frame is laid out that this is to be a battle between God, and His forces of nature, and Pharaoh a stubborn king who believes that he is a god. Thus begins a series of 10 plagues that occur to Egypt by God's command, through the instrument and presence of Moses and Aaron. First the waters of Egypt turn to blood, then a plague of frogs invades all of the homes, then lice infect everyone, man and beast, and finally a plague of insects or wild beasts, it is not clear exactly what it is, spreads throughout Egypt. Pharaoh offers a short vacation for the Israelite slaves, but reneges on his offer. So, a cattle pestilence is sent that destroys Egyptian flocks, then boils appear on people's skins, after that a violent hail storm destroys all crops and livestock not secured inside. Pharaoh admits that he is wrong, and he promises to let them go if Moses will just stop the hail. Moses asks God to stop the hail, but in the end Pharaoh again hardens his heart and does not allow them to leave.

### **\*Ex. 6, 2-5**

*"God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name "the Lord". I also established ("ve-gam hakimoti") My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard ("ve-gam ani shamati") the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant."*

Parashat Va-Era starts with a dramatic declaration: "God spoke to Moses and said to him, "I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name "the Lord". I also established ("ve-gam hakimoti") My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard ("ve-gam ani shamati") the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered My covenant."

This passage signifies a turn of affairs: Divine cognizance of the plight of Israel and Divine resolve to do something about it. However, the very turn of affairs raises questions. Why does the God not respond to Israel's suffering before this? The name "the Lord" signifies in the Midrash the quality of Divine mercy ("midat ha-rahamim"). If, as the Midrash reads it, God only reveals this quality here, where was it before now?

These thorny questions are dealt with in the framework of textual difficulties which the English translation smoothes over. One difficulty is with the word "ve-gam", which can mean "also" but can also mean "in spite of". Another difficulty is that there is no symmetry between verse 4 and verse 5. Verse 4 begins "ve-gam hakimoti" "also I established", with the pronoun 'I' being understood from the suffix of the construct "hakimoti". But, in Verse 5, "ve-gam ani shamati", the pronoun "ani" 'I' seems to be superfluous, since the suffix exists. What is the reason for the emphasis on "I"? Why does verse 5 not also have the same emphasis?

Almost all of the Midrashim and commentaries on these textual difficulties use them to explain the theological difficulties by interpreting the texts to show that until this point in history, God did not respond to Israel's plight because of some fault of the people. Typical of this approach is the interpretation by R. Judah of the verse "leaping over the mountains" (SoS 2:8). R. Judah says that if God would look at the deeds of Israel in Egypt they would never have been redeemed! But, the word 'mountains' refers to the patriarchs, and thus we learn that God looked at the merits of the ancestors, and remembered the covenant with them! (**Ex. R. 15,4**) The above declaration revolves totally around the covenant with the ancestors, and in particular the Covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15) in which God foretold of a bondage and deliverance. The people are basically unworthy, but God keeps his word.

A different twist on this approach is found in another Midrash. Here God mentions the ancestors and coins the phrase "pity that the present generation is not as good as the ancestors". But, what is unique in this Midrash is its explanation of what is special about the ancestors that is missing in the generation of the Egyptian bondage. God tells Moses that he had made a covenant with each ancestor, and even though the covenant was not fulfilled, \*they remained faithful to it\*. Not only that, but \*they manifested their continued faith by the way of concrete deeds. "I told Abraham to travel the length and breadth of the land for it will be his (cf. Gen. 13), but when he needed to bury Sarah he had NO land UNTIL he bought a field with money!" This Midrash cites examples from each of the ancestors who despite the lack of a clear fulfillment of God's promise, acted as if the promise was in effect. (**Ex. R. 6,4**)

This Midrash says that God heard their moaning from slavery, i.e. from the harshness of slavery, but not out of despair that God's promise would be kept. Still, they did not act properly ("lo hayu nohagin ke-shurah"), that is, they did NOTHING to break away from enslavement and return to the land. There was no delegation to the King, no attempts at escape or rebellion. Unlike the ancestors they accepted their fate as it was, even though they did not give up the faith in God's covenant. Here the people are basically worthy, but since they had done nothing to act on their faith, God's intervention had remained dormant.

The only explanation that differs from this general approach, that I found, was in the commentary of R. Hayyim ben Moshe Attar. He takes the repetition of "ve-gam" to signify that there are different and separate reasons for God's response. He writes: "In addition to their praying for God's mercy, and in addition to God's love of the ancestors and the covenant with them, there is a third aspect [leading to God's intervention]. That is purely their scream out of bondage, God hears their heartache. This is why it says "ani" emphasizing God's mercy [which is personal involvement in the pain of others]... God needs no other reason to intervene, like a wounded person crying out [one should help] without need for petition ...." (**"Or Ha-Hayyim" on Ex. 6:5**)

God's mercy is beyond any conditional deliverance. Whether the people were worthy or not, whether their ancestors were worthy or not, whether they prayed for God's mercy or not, God's mercy is stirred up by human suffering. When one person oppresses another and causes them heartache, to implement God's mercy means to help relieve the suffering without reference to their deeds. That reference is, in a sense, judgmental and more in keeping with God's quality of justice rather than

mercy. Those people who help the suffering are the ones who really activate God's mercy in the world. It is those who help without asking if they will be rewarded or if the person being helped is truly worthy who implement 'midat ha-rahamim', the quality of mercy. **TTT 84 T and M**

**\*Ex. 6, 13**

*"So the Lord spoke to both Moses and Aaron commanding them with regard to ["va-yetzavem"] the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt."*

At the end of last week's parasha Moses was attacked by the Israelites for arousing Pharaoh's wrath against them with talk of leaving Egypt. Moses then turns to God and berates God for sending him. He is angry that not only is God's promise to Moses to liberate Israel not fulfilled, but that things are even worse for the nation. Our parasha, Va-Era, opens with God giving a pep talk to Moses, explaining that God will keep the covenant with Israel, and that God will free them and bring them to the promised land. This is the famous passage upon which the Midrash bases the obligation of four cups of wine at the Seder. Also God tells Moses that he must return and give this pep talk to Israel. Presumably, this will calm them down and return their confidence in God's plan.

Moses returns and delivers the speech. The Torah tells us that it was a big flop: "But when Moses told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moses, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage. The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land." (Ex. 6, 9-11) Even though the Israelites will not listen, God insists that Moses go to Pharaoh and demand that he release Israel from bondage.

Moses is incredulous. "But Moses appealed to the Lord, saying, "The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!" (Ex. 6, 12) God's response is the same. God has a one track obsession with speaking this message. The Torah tells us: "So the Lord spoke to both Moses and Aaron commanding them with regard to ["va-yetzavem"] the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt, instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt." (Ex. 6, 13)

What is interesting is how in verse 13 God commands EVERYONE to deliver the Israelites, Moses and Aaron, Israel itself, and Pharaoh. The Hebrew word "va-yetzavem" means literally "commanded them". It is the root of the word mitzvah, and it is clear that God is giving orders here to all concerned. That is, the order to change the situation of slavery applies to all concerned, not only to Pharaoh! The condition of slavery and oppression involves all, and thus all must be commanded to change that condition. **TTT 84 T and M**

But, our verse also says that God gave specific instructions to Moses and Aaron about the dynamics of the situation. That is, Moses and Aaron are given specific instructions that will help them deal with both the Israelites and Pharaoh so that they will be able to succeed in their mission! Now, this is about time. God has let them blunder around until this point, and it has not worked. So, our verse signals a turning point in God's working. God realizes that Moses and Aaron need to be

helped, they need a guidebook to deal with both Israel and Pharaoh so that in the end Israel will be freed.

Just what is God telling Moses and Aaron that will aid them in their task? One Midrash spells it out. As far as the Israelites go God tells Moses and Aaron: "my children are nags, contrary, and so they will harass you with complaints, they will curse you, they will want to stone you" (**Ex. R. 7, 3 Shinan edition**). God wants Moses to know from the outset; don't expect gratitude and fawning from the oppressed nation.

One of the sources of Moses's depression is that the Israelites do not cooperate with him. They seem to be angrier with him than they are with Pharaoh! Moses is crushed and wants to give up. God commands him, that is, tells him that this is the way it is. Moses's mission is to free the Israelites, and this freedom for nations is God's will, it does not depend on whether the nation is nice or sympathetic. Even nagging and disobedient nations deserve their freedom. Moses has to know this, otherwise he might fail to bring freedom to them by laxness or apathy or even disgust at the behavior of the people he is working to free!

As to Pharaoh, our Midrash has God commanding Moses and Aaron: "treat him with respect ["heyu nohagin bo kavod"] and be respectful towards the government ["ve-hilku kavod le-malkhut"] although I must justly punish them ["af al pi she-ani tzarikh la'asot bo et ha-din"]." God tells Moses that one of the obstacles to his succeeding is that he is acting arrogantly and contemptuously towards Pharaoh personally and towards the government of Egypt. This is wrong despite the fact that the government is acting unjustly and God will judge them and punish them!

Moses is instructed that one of the basic rules of behavior is to show respect to those in authority, even as you work to bring about their judgment by God! Perhaps there is even a hint that if one disrespects the government then one will disrespect God. Perhaps there is a hint here for Moses that the attitude of the people towards Moses is partly conditioned by Moses' attitude towards Pharaoh! Just as Moses must fervently work on behalf of the nation, even though they are troublesome, so he must respect Pharaoh as king, even though he is troublesome. Once again, freedom for nations is the overriding goal, one which obviates our normal feelings of disgust at the crimes of governments. They will be punished, by God, and as for the humans working on behalf of freedom, they must treat the government for what it is, the authority of the land. (for expansion of this idea cf. **Tanhuma Bo 7**)

The common denominator of these commands is that achieving freedom for people is such a high value that one needs to overlook bad behavior on all sides of the conflict in order to achieve that freedom. Neither side is free when involved in the conflict. Israel is not free [perhaps this is part of the notion of their rebelliousness and constant desire to return to Egypt] nor is Pharaoh [perhaps this is part of the notion that God hardened Pharaoh's heart]. They are not free, our Midrash seems to say, because they are both relating ONLY to the abhorrent behavior of the other side. It is this obsession with the faults of the other side that robs both sides of its freedom.

**TTT 84 M**

God tells Moses that he, as the outside force that is to implement God's will, must keep his eye on the goal, and disregard the nasty behavior of both sides. This is not to say that God does not judge evil actions and punish them. Moses is told that Egypt will suffer for their crimes, but HIS job, as the agent of God, is to bring about the condition of freedom. In order to do that he must ignore the aberrant behavior of both sides and work for a state of disengagement from the situation that is creating the slavery in the first place.

**\*Ex. 6, 10-13**

*"The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land.' But Moses appealed to the LORD, saying, 'The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!' So the LORD spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt ('va-yetzavem el benei Yisrael ve-el Paro'), instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt."*

Up to this point, after Moses finally agrees to accept God's charge to return to Egypt, and approach Pharaoh in order to secure the release of Israel from bondage (Ex. 4, 13ff.); things do not go well, and the end of last week's reading Moses, in despair, complains against God: "Then Moses returned to the LORD and said, 'O Lord, why did You bring harm upon this people? Why did You send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has dealt worse with this people; and still You have not delivered Your people.'" (Ex. 5, 22-23)

Continuing the story, in parashat Va-Era we hear God's answer to this complaint. God, again, tells Moses that they will prevail and be a free nation. When Moses reports this to the Israelites they do not listen, and God, again, repeats his charge to Moses: "The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 'Go and tell Pharaoh king of Egypt to let the Israelites depart from his land.' But Moses appealed to the LORD, saying, 'The Israelites would not listen to me; how then should Pharaoh heed me, a man of impeded speech!' So the LORD spoke to both Moses and Aaron in regard to the Israelites and Pharaoh king of Egypt (*va-yetzavem el benei Yisrael ve-el Paro*), instructing them to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt." (Ex. 6, 10-13)

In verse 13, God turns to both Moses and Aaron. Indeed, when Moses turned down God's mission by telling Him to pick someone else (4, 13), God became angry at Moses and told him that someone else would indeed be with him, namely, Aaron. So, here when Moses demurs about his being able to succeed with Pharaoh, God replies, Aaron will help you with that as well. (cf. **Ex. R. 7, 1 ed. Shinan**)

Aside from the sudden switch from talking only to Moses to talking to both Moses and Aaron there is another problem in this verse. Our translation has God speaking to them both "in regard to" Israel and Pharaoh. The Hebrew "*va-yetzavem*", is stronger than "in regard to", and seems to imply a command or an order. The order is "to deliver the Israelites from the land of Egypt". This is an appropriate command for Pharaoh, but how does it fit with Israel?

One approach is to interpret the Hebrew word not only as "command" in the sense of "demand", but in the sense of "giving instruction". The Hebrew root is also used for a will, that is "instructions to be carried out after death". We usually think of

instructions of a will as being sacrosanct, but the fact is they represent the wishes of the deceased, and as such might possibly be ignored. They are more in the way of guidance.

So, Pharaoh is "commanded" to release Israel, but what instruction or command is given to Israel?! The Midrash has a field day with this open question. Some of the Midrashim see the "guidance" being given to Moses and Aaron, translating our verse thus: "[God] gave them [Moses and Aaron] guidance concerning the children of Israel". What does God tell them about their flock? "My children are contentious, angry and pesky, therefore you should know that they will curse you and throw stones at you, and you shall tell Pharaoh to release them from Egypt, therefore show honor to him and to his kingship, even though I must eventually punish him by law," (**Ex. R. 7, 3**) God's advice to them is that they must willingly suffer the abstemiousness of Israel. In order to be a Jewish leader, one needs "thick skin". But, in addition, the advice is to treat all adversaries with honor, even if you know that they deserve punishment.

Another Midrash which reads the verse this way, and can be seen as an expansion of this one, has God's advice to Moses and Aaron being: "never call my children "rebels". That is, the advice to treat them with honor, despite their thorniness, is to not lose one's temper and admonish them with perjorative names. Since, Moses does call them rebels at the water of Merivah (Num. 20, 10), he and Aaron are not allowed into the land of Israel. (**Pesikta d'Rav Kahana 14, 5**).

Yet another Midrash in this line has God's advice to Moses and Aaron being that they must engage the leaders of the tribes together with them in leadership. The proof is that the very next verse deals with the names of the heads of each clan. (**Ex. R. 7, 3 ed. Shinan**) Jewish leaders need a thick skin, to control themselves and not lash out at the people, and to empower the local leadership to be partners.

Other Midrashim view the guidance as being given, through Moses and Aaron, to Israel. One sees it as like a command to remove themselves from idolatry. (**Mekhilta d'R. Ishmael, Bo, massekhta d'Pasha, 5**) Another source in this direction is found in the Jerusalem Talmud. There is a discussion about the Jubilee year. The two signs of a Jubilee year are, the blowing of the shofar throughout the land, and the remission of all slaves (Lev. 25, 9-10). The Talmudic discussion wants to discover if both of these are necessary requirements of a Jubilee year. If one or both is missing, is it still a Jubilee? One answer is that both are necessary. One cannot merely have the shofar ritual without the freeing of the slaves.

But, another opinion reasons that the two elements are not equal. The blowing of the shofar depends on the Bet Din, but the freeing of the slaves depends on each and every slaveholder. Indeed, according to this view, what God advised Moses and Aaron and Israel was to make sure to be very strict about the release of slaves. Indeed, according to this source, Israel was punished ONLY because they did not release the slaves in the seventh year. (**TJ Rosh Ha-Shanah, 3, hal. 5, 58d**). What a wonderful notion, that God's demands of Pharaoh are the same demands of Israel. The notion that slaves are to be released is universal, and God holds accountable those who do not release their slaves. The moral imperative, which depends on every

single individual, to create a just society and a compassionate society is at the basis of God's demands and of God's guidance. TTT 85 M and T

**\*Ex. 7, 8-13**

*"The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, 'Produce your marvel,' ["t'nu lakhem mofet"] you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.' It shall turn into a serpent." So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the LORD had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same with their spells; each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed their rods. Yet Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said."*

God sends Moses and Aaron off on their mission to free the Israelites from Egyptian bondage. The Torah recounts these instructions: "The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, "When Pharaoh speaks to you and says, 'Produce your marvel,' ["t'nu lakhem mofet"] you shall say to Aaron, 'Take your rod and cast it down before Pharaoh.' It shall turn into a serpent." So Moses and Aaron came before Pharaoh and did just as the LORD had commanded: Aaron cast down his rod in the presence of Pharaoh and his courtiers, and it turned into a serpent. Then Pharaoh, for his part, summoned the wise men and the sorcerers; and the Egyptian magicians, in turn, did the same with their spells; each cast down his rod, and they turned into serpents. But Aaron's rod swallowed their rods. Yet Pharaoh's heart stiffened and he did not heed them, as the LORD had said." (Ex. 7, 8-13)

Our English translation smoothes over difficulties in the Hebrew text. Pharaoh says "t'nu lakhem mofet" which literally translates as "give you (yourselves) a marvel". Actually modern colloquial Hebrew might use the word "lakhem" in the way of the JPS translation, namely, 'produce your marvel'. But, most people who think of themselves as speaking grammatically correct Hebrew would see this as a mistake. Pharaoh surely means to say "show ME a marvel", and thus, the Hebrew needs to be "t'nu LI mofet".

R. Moshe Alshekh, who moved to Tzefat and was a member of the Bet Din of R. Yosef Karo, points out that Pharaoh's words are spoken by God, while explaining to Moses and Aaron how their mission will go. That is, he sees the phrase as an interjection by God, and its meaning is "don't make it seem as if you are the marvel". The danger here is that Moses and Aaron will seem to be wonder workers, and this will detract from the Divine power that comes into play. People will think that they are just great magicians, and like the other magicians they can use spells or incantations to produce marvels.

He asks what is so special about this marvel that they do, especially since right afterwards the Egyptian magicians do the same thing! Alshekh interprets God's words as saying to Moses and Aaron, you need to wait until Pharaoh speaks. He will say something like "let's see if you can do a marvel", Alshekh's interpretation of our phrase. It will not be said as a request to produce something that will induce him to believe, but rather it will be spoken as a challenge to your status, especially if you cannot produce any trick.

So, when the challenge is issued you must immediately say to Aaron to take his rod and cast it down before Pharaoh. It must be immediate so that all can see that there is no spell and no incantation, but that this is a real change in nature, something which could only come from a Divine cause. Pharaoh will then call his magicians, and expect them to do the same thing. But, they CANNOT, because they must use spells. And thus, it is clear to all that Moses and Aaron are applying Divine power, and thus their rod can swallow all the others.

What is interesting in this comment is the distinction between acknowledging a real marvel and being privy to complex trickery. One of the signs that enable us to distinguish these two is that if it is trickery the persons who do it claim that they are the marvels. The trick is merely a vehicle for them to establish their special worth. The modesty of Moses and Aaron is real because they reveal God's marvels without any pretense that they are the wonder workers. (**Sefer Torat Moshe, va-era, 9 ff.**)

R. Elimelekh of Lyzhensk also asks why Pharaoh says "you" and not "me". He also wonders why the Torah tells us that Pharaoh's heart stiffened. After all, says R. Elimelekh, after the Egyptian magicians had duplicated the trick, there was no need to stiffen his heart! (**Noam Elimelekh va-era**)

He explains that a person who is accustomed to miracles, and who feels God's miraculous presence with him all the time is always aware of the greatness and the renewal in these miracles each time. If one has a sense of awe, as our teacher Rabbi Heschel says, sensitivity for the ineffable, one can be aware of miracles all around us all the time. As we say in the Modim prayer, we thank God for the miracles that are with us in every moment. Most of us are not aware, and we need prayer to open up our awareness to these miracles. But, say R. Elimelekh, if a person has done some wondrous thing by magic or trickery, after the first time all the rest are boring and unexciting. Contrived miracles do not awaken our sense of awe.

Thus, Pharaoh asks Moses and Aaron to produce a marvel that will be a genuine producer of awe for THEM. He wants to see something to which they will react as if in the presence of the Divine. Their wonder, which was not a result of spells, was thus an awe inspiring ineffable experience. But, the wonders of the sorcerers, produced by spells, were boring and predictable. They did not arouse a sense of awe, and thus Pharaoh hardened his heart, precisely because it was NOT opened to the possibility of Divine miracles.

This discourse on the recognition of miracle versus artificial wonder is fascinating. Our sense of awe needs to be cultivated, and particularly for the so-called simple and common everyday things. Those things which make life possible, even the simple acts of breathing or the elimination of waste, are opportunities for blessings which will make us aware of the miraculous in them. They are not artificial nor are they boring. They are the stuff of what our teacher Max Kadushin called "normal mysticism". Reciting the blessings trains us to recognize the wonder in them, and gives us an appropriate reaction to that wonder. In this way we can strive to be people who are aware of God's presence in the world. **TTT 86 Heschel and Kadushin**



**\*Ex. 7, 25 - 27**

<sup>25</sup>When seven days had passed after the LORD struck the Nile, <sup>26</sup>the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh and say to him, 'Thus says the LORD: Let My people go that they may worship Me. <sup>27</sup>If you refuse to let them go, then I will plague your whole country with frogs.

In this week's parasha the series of plagues begins. We all remember them from the seder night, thanks to R. Yehuda. The first plague, blood, seems very difficult, and we wonder that Pharaoh did not release Israel then. The second plague, frogs, is preceded by a verse which **Shemot Rabbah (10:2)** develops: "behold I will plague (nogef) your border (boundaries, gevulecha) with frogs" (Ex. 7:27). This midrash relates to two problematic words in this verse: nogef and gevulecha.

The word nogef is literally a plague, some sort of disease. How does this word go together with a rash of frogs? One explanation is that it means to push the phenomena on Egypt, like in Ex. 21:35, where the verb "yigof" refers to one ox pushing another. From this point of view, the plagues are God's pushing Egypt to the limits, a kind of attack on their stability. Another explanation, is that the word refers to a disease, and each one of God's attacks on Egypt had the effect of a plague as well. Perhaps, this is not so far fetched, if we remember the description of mounds of dead frogs piling up all over Egypt. In this way of seeing things each "plague" spreads disease, and Pharaoh's recalcitrance works to disintegrate Egyptian society from within.

But, the most fascinating part of this Midrash is the idea that the plague of frogs, actually helped Egypt to achieve peace with the Cushites! It seems that Egypt and Cush had a dispute over territory. But, since the frogs were ONLY found in Egyptian territory (gevulecha), this settled the matter of territorial dispute once and for all. This plague actually had a positive side to it. Maybe, that is why Pharaoh could ignore this one so easily. Even though he was personally distressed by having frogs everywhere. Still, he could "sell" his point of view to the Egyptians, saying that at least this plague of frogs established without a doubt where our borders really are. This rabbinic comment has a comic or farcical cast to it. **TTT 87 H and L and M**

However, there is a serious side to this Midrash. Many times when disaster strikes, boundaries are set. Part of the problem with disease or loss of loved ones, is that the very phenomenon acts to distinguish the sufferer from others. We think to ourselves: "the frogs are in their yard, not in mine". It is at moments like this when we see the blessing of having flexible boundaries, when one person feels that they can approach the other, even if through argument. We can learn from this Midrash to fight the tendency to set up boundaries around our friends who are suffering, and help them by our presence.

**\*Ex. 9, 27, 34**

*"Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong." ...*

*"But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he became stubborn and reverted to his guilty ways ("va-yosef lahto"), as did his courtiers."*

In the great confrontation between God, Moses and Aaron, and Pharaoh, the Egyptian king remains obdurate in his refusal to recognize God in any way. Finally,

after the devastation on man and beast of the hail, Pharaoh seems to have a change of mind: "Thereupon Pharaoh sent for Moses and Aaron and said to them, "I stand guilty this time. The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong." (Ex. 9, 27) But, when the hail stops, Pharaoh reverts: "But when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunder had ceased, he became stubborn and reverted to his guilty ways ("va-yosef lahto"; lit. "he added to his sin"), as did his courtiers." (Ex. 9, 34)

This is the first time that Pharaoh's stubbornness is called "sin". Not only that, but Pharaoh himself is the one who describes his actions as transgression! One Midrash comments that until this point, the only ones who suffered directly by the plagues were the Egyptians. Pharaoh had not been personally touched by any of the plagues. This Midrash states simply: "The Holy One brought plagues on the Egyptians, and Pharaoh did not feel them. But, as soon as his own person was touched he began to scream "The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong."" (Ex. R. 15, 10) According to this Midrash, the cause of Pharaoh's sudden and surprising exclamation of guilt is that for the first time he himself feels the pain that his nation has been suffering.

Rashbam, the grandson of Rashi, sees something else going on here. He comments: "until now he did not intend to intentionally sin, but from the moment he admitted that "I and my people are in the wrong", then his actions become intentional sin." (Rashbam on Ex. 9, 34)

Rashbam points to a profound truth. If, until now, Pharaoh's actions are not to be considered transgressions, how are they to be considered? He has refused to grant God's request, through Moses, and, from the point of view of the reader of the Torah, looks guilty of intentional sin. Yet, Rashbam's comment implies that an action cannot be considered an intentional sin unless the person committing the action acknowledges, perhaps in speech, that his action is wrong. At the very least he must show awareness that it is wrong by God's standard. Pharaoh acknowledges both that God is right, and that what he has been doing is wrong by God's test.

Pharaoh's statement is an intrusion into his mindset. He suddenly judges himself as if from God's perspective. Until now he had not considered what he was doing from any perspective other than that of his own position, his understanding of his duty as king and policy maker of Egypt. By those standards, his refusal could be explained as not sinful, and so his actual cruelty is not willful, but arises from lack of awareness. But, once Pharaoh acknowledges that there exist Divine standards for right and wrong, standards that don't depend on any political or social theory, then his actions are judged wrong.

This is a striking example of the fruitful distinction made by philosophers of ethics in discussing actions in an ethical system which assumes that certain acts are wrong, or right, by some absolute standard, here called God's standard. The distinction is that an act which is absolutely wrong, is wrong, but, there may be circumstances in which this very act will be justified. This preserves the idea of absolute standards, and yet allows some type of situational judgment of an act in terms of its justification, about which there can always be argument. **TTT 88 M and B and T**

One of the most striking features of the Midrash and Talmud is that everything is open to question. The Bible clearly states that act A was bad. Somewhere in the corpus of the oral tradition an attempt will be made to examine possible ways to justify it, to override the simple Biblical text. For example, the discussions of motivation ("li-shema" "le-shem shamayim") regarding Biblical stories such as Lot and his daughters. (cf. **Horayot 10b; Nazir 23a**) At the same time, the Biblical account is accredited from a Divine point of view, e. g. punishment in kind, "midah ke-neged midah". Sometimes both of these viewpoints are found in the same Midrash. The Midrash vis a vis Biblical narrative and the Talmud vis a vis Biblical codes of conduct exhibit the same world of discourse as that of the philosopher's summarized here.

**TTT 88 MI**

If the assumption of God's standard is not accepted, this leads to a total relativism, which can make the very terms "good" and "bad" seem to be irrelevant. On the other hand, the application of the test of justification for "bad" acts allows one, for example, to kill in self-defense. However, because killing is absolutely bad, it can never be praised in itself, nor become a "standard" for emulation in every situation. The moral person in this type of system is a person who is always aware of the need to justify his actions against God's standard. (For interesting examples of this see my essay on "War and Peace" in Etz Hayim.)

Pharaoh is the same person who, on the one hand, refuses to listen to God's charge on behalf of freedom for the slaves, and who, on the other hand, admits that he is wrong and God is right. Indeed, one Midrash praises Pharaoh's moment of recognition as worthy of reward. The reward is that Israel is commanded that it is forbidden to despise Egyptians (Deut. 23, 8). (**Mekhilta d' Shimon bar Yohai, 12, 32; but see Mekhilta d' R. Ishmael, beshallah**) This is a reward for Egyptians, and an example for all people. One who is open to distinguish right and wrong in Divine terms, and who can apply that possibility to themselves, cannot be considered a completely evil person, thus, they should never be despised.

Until now Pharaoh probably had myriads of justifications for his policies against the Hebrew sojourners. The Torah even spells out some of them: they are a demographic threat to Egypt, they are a fifth column which will join Egypt's enemies in time of war, (Ex. 1, 10) they are lazy and do not appreciate all that the state has done for them (Ex. 5, 8). But, at this moment Pharaoh has, even for a moment, acknowledged that perhaps his acts cannot be justified by God's standard. It is that acknowledgement which this Midrash points to as the locus of the command not to despise Egyptians.

Indeed, one of the most amazing of all Midrashim seems to take this idea as its starting point. Pharaoh's admission of Divine standards, his questioning of his own justification for acting against the Divine standard, provides this Midrash with a vision of Pharaoh developing into a moral role model.

In this creative Midrash Pharaoh, as he begins to sink in the sea, again cries out that God was right, and he is wrong. He is nevertheless forced down into the sea, and there undergoes a real education in which he affirms God's standards of behavior, when NOT in mortal danger. Thus, after reaching that understanding, he is reborn from his watery grave of the Reed Sea, and made the king of Nineveh, the one of the

book of Jonah. (**Otzar ha-Midrashim, p. 154**) Yes, he is the one who recognizes that repentance must be done.

This Aggadah is warning us of the extreme danger in denying the absolute standards that are our responsibility to uphold for the welfare of the other, in favor of consecrating contemporary justification for deviation from those standards. No matter how justified that deviation is in a given situation the justified deviation should not be confused with the standard. Our Midrash reminds us that maintaining the acknowledgement of God's standard, and maintaining an acute sense of the need to justify deviation from that standard, are the keys to societies which may, in the future, heed God's laws in a more perfect way. **TTT 88 M and B and T**

**\*Ex. 9, 30-32**

*<sup>30</sup>But I know that you and your courtiers do not yet ["terem"] fear the LORD God." – <sup>31</sup>Now the flax and barley were ruined, for the barley was in the ear and the flax was in bud; <sup>32</sup>but the wheat and the emmer were not hurt, for they ripen late.*

Moses brings plagues upon Egypt, and still Pharaoh refuses to let Israel go. The story of this abstinence in the face of Divine wrath is well known and the subject of much interpretation. In this week's parasha we have one little word "terem", whose interpretation sheds light on what is proper "fear of God" ("yirat ha-shem"), belief in the Divine.

After the plague of hail, Moses says to Pharaoh and his court: "I know that you and your servants "terem" fear the Lord God. Now the flax and barley were destroyed by the hail....but the wheat and spelt were not...." (Ex. 9:30-32). What is the meaning of the word "terem"? What is being said about the "fear of God" of the Egyptians? There is a dispute about this between Rashi and Ibn Ezra. Rashi explains that the word "terem" means "no" or "not yet". According to Rashi, Moses is saying "I know that you do not yet fear the Lord, even while witnessing this plague. After the plague is over and there is relief from it, you will remain obstinate and have no awe of God's might or mercy".

From **Rashi's** point of view, "fear" of God's might is natural when experiencing the force of blows that can be felt as coming from God, and Moses is astonished that the Egyptians are unmoved by these forces. On the other hand, it is also natural to feel "awe" of God when suffering ends, and at that time to feel grateful. Moses thinks that the Egyptians will not feel even that. "Terem" is thus a word of total negation, and shows the Egyptians as an unfeeling people who can have no relationship to God, they deny or are impervious to both God's might and mercy.

**Ibn Ezra** rejects Rashi's translation of "terem" as negation. He understands the word to mean "before" or "up to now". In his view, Moses is berating the Egyptians saying that "up to now, when you have experienced God's punishment, you fear him", but when the hail will stop, you will return to scoffing at God's power. The bad thing about the Egyptians' attitude for Ibn Ezra is not that they are total atheists, but that they believe in God only when they are in danger and have something to fear. In normal times, when things seem to be going all right, they have no use for God. **TTT 89 M and T**

**R. Bahya Ibn Pakuda** accepts Ibn Ezra's reading and connects it to the continuing verses, which at first glance seem to be unrelated. What does the state of damage of the crops have to do with the state of the Egyptians belief in God? R. Bahya sees verses 31 and 32 as supporting Ibn Ezra. "Formerly ("terem") you feared God, when the flax and the barley were destroyed, but when you see that the wheat and spelt are spared you will stop being in awe of God".

Each interpretation sees this verse as a criticism of types of belief in God. Both total disinterest or rejection and instant belief only in time of trouble are unworthy ways to relate to the Divine.

*This is the first parasha of the book of Exodus. It begins with a flashback to the emigration of Jacob and his family to Egypt. The welcome they got from Pharaoh was replaced by suspicion and a plan by the king to enslave the nation that had sprung up from that family. One of the measures the new Pharaoh implements is murder of all sons born to Israelites. Two Levite parents try and hide their new born son in a basket on the Nile. He is found by Pharaoh's daughter, and saved when his sister, who had been keeping watch offers to find a nurse for the baby*

**\*Ex. 10:1-2**

*"Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them – in order that you may know that I am the LORD."*

Parashat Bo continues the story of the plagues. Our parasha starts out: "Then the LORD said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers, in order that I may display these My signs among them, and that you may recount in the hearing of your sons and of your sons' sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them – in order that you may know that I am the LORD." (Ex. 10:1-2)

There seems to be a special emphasis placed on recounting the plagues for three generations, parents, children and grandchildren. This specific command seems to contradict the verse that says that we are to remember the Exodus all the days of our lives (Deut. 16:3). This verse is interpreted by some to mean to include even the days of the Messiah (cf. Haggadah shel Pesah etc.). Why then does our verse refer only to 3 generations? (cf. **Sefer Degel Mahaneh Efraim**).

In the plainest sense this wording refers to the most common makeup of human society. Rarely does a group compose more than those three generations. Indeed, in making of wills most Western law systems do not ALLOW one to bequeath property beyond grandchildren. In any case, the continuation of generations is in the same pattern. Second generation becomes first, third becomes second and they, in turn, bear the new third generation. That is, one could say that the expression "your sons and of your sons' sons" merely reflects the continuity of generations, and thus does NOT contradict the verse in Deut.

A comment by the Baal ha-Turim adds to this understanding. He points out that until this point only the parents had worried about their children. But, from this command on, the children are made partners in the experience of the bondage and the deliverance from Egypt. By including the three immediate generations, the Torah here creates a sharing of the formative experience. It is that sharing which turns the story of the Exodus into a formative part of the continuity of Jewish identity. Today, one of the strongest formative experiences is the Seder table with the generations all gathered sharing the story of the Exodus together. This verse is still working!

Another interesting comment on this verse is that of the Maharil of Prague. He is fascinated by the fact that Moses does not know what the plague will be, yet he announces it assertively to Pharaoh (v. 4). God had given warning to Moses about the nature of a plague before, why not here and how does Moses know? Maharil refers to the Midrash that God gave Moses a hint as to what the plague would be when he specified that this plague was to be the one to be recounted to "your sons and of your sons' sons" (**Ex. R. 13,4**). He thinks that the command to recount is only for this plague and it is just this point that reveals to Moses that God is talking about locusts.

The hint is found in the verses of Joel about a locust plague (Joel 1:2-3): "Listen to this, O elders, Give ear, all inhabitants of the land. Has the like of this happened in your days Or in the days of your fathers? Tell your children about it, And let your children tell theirs, And their children the next generation!" Locust plagues are particularly the subject which is passed on as a witness of faith to God's protection. What is so unique about it that it has that role? (**Gevurot ha-Shem, 33, p. 126**)

Maharil explains that if a plague is unique and never occurs again, such as blood, then it is forgotten and cannot be pointed to in the span of three generations as a common experience of God's actions. On the other hand if it is so common, such as Hail, that it seems totally natural it also cannot fulfill that role. Locusts, however, do happen and reoccur, but not so commonly, so that it is appropriate to infer that it happened at a particular time because of God's will. In addition, the plague in Egypt was particularly harsh (cf. V. 6), and thus is a particular manifestation of God's might. **TTT 90 T**

**\*Ex. 10, 7-11**

*<sup>7</sup>Pharaoh's courtiers said to him, "How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the LORD their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?" <sup>8</sup>So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, "Go, worship the LORD your God! Who are the ones to go?" <sup>9</sup>Moses replied, "We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the LORD's festival." <sup>10</sup>But he said to them, "The LORD be with you the same as I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief. <sup>11</sup>No! You menfolk go and worship the LORD, since that is what you want." And they were expelled from Pharaoh's presence.*

At the beginning of parashat Bo it looks as if Moses might succeed in his campaign to free Israel from Egyptian bondage. The plagues have brought about unrest in Pharaoh's court, and the people seem to be willing to let Israel go in order to prevent any more suffering on their part. The Torah recounts: "Pharaoh's courtiers said to him, 'How long shall this one be a snare to us? Let the men go to worship the LORD their God! Are you not yet aware that Egypt is lost?'" (Ex. 10, 7)

"So Moses and Aaron were brought back to Pharaoh and he said to them, 'Go, worship the LORD your God! Who are the ones to go?' Moses replied, 'We will all go, young and old: we will go with our sons and daughters, our flocks and herds; for we must observe the LORD's festival.'" (Ex. 10, 8-9) Now, as we remember Moses was told that his message to Pharaoh was to send Israel free, and to let them go into the wilderness, a distance of 3 days away, to worship God. This was the message that God sends to Pharaoh through Moses!

It is certainly an ambiguous message. Does he mean, they will go for a worship service and never return? Is the implication that this is a one time deal? Pharaoh certainly thinks of it that way, but, he is not sure, since the temporary sound of this request also includes what seems to be an ultimate demand, "set us free", period. So, to test his understanding he asks "who are the ones to go?" Moses replies quite simply, all of us and all of our possessions. From this response, Pharaoh immediately sees that the three day trek to worship God is a ruse to escape. Thus, he replies: "But he said to them, 'The LORD be with you the same as I mean to let your children go with you! Clearly, you are bent on mischief. ('re'u ki ra'ah neged peneikhem') No! You menfolk go ('lekhu na ha-gevarim') and worship the LORD, since that is what you want." And they were expelled from Pharaoh's presence." (Ex. 10, 10-11)

The translation smoothes over the very difficult Hebrew phrases which I have indicated. The translation of "ki ra'ah neged peneikhem" as, "you are bent on mischief" is alright as far as it goes, but it misses the connotation of "you have evil intention written all over your faces". The Midrash makes it clear that Pharaoh understands the trick, and is infuriated by it. He rants at them, "you want to leave by trickery, you will never get out of here." (Ex. R. 13, 13 Shinan ed.)

More interesting is Pharaoh's seemingly goodhearted compromise. Let the men ("gevarim") go to worship God. That is not a matter for women or children. It is an insulting putdown. **Ibn Ezra** has two contradictory explanations of the word "gevarim". In his comment on our verse (long version), he says that the word "gever" in all of the Bible refers to males, unlike the word "adam". But, in his comment on **Ps. 37, 23**, he says that the word "gever" means one who has full grown-up consciousness, and quotes our verse in Ex. as an example! As if, Pharaoh is saying "only the grown-ups can go", leave the children behind. In that case, the word "gevarim" might refer to both men and women who are not minors.

So, why did Moses not take Pharaoh up on his suggestion? At least, the men, or the grown-ups, could have escaped. The children would remain, and who knows what would happen to them? Maybe God would bring more plagues and secure their release later on. Perhaps, Moses and the others could have organized an army and gone back to free them. What is behind the refusal of the men to leave when given the chance?

R. Tzemah Duran has an interesting Responsa which sheds light on our question. He was asked a question by some Jews who had made a contract between five families to all leave their homes in Algeria and move to Eretz Yisrael. They swore a solemn oath that they would all go together, and that anyone who did not go would be a defiler of the oath, unless he was compelled not to keep the oath for a reason they all found acceptable. Then two families appealed to a local rabbi, who took from them 10 gold dinarim, and released them from their oath. Duran was asked if this R. Ephraim had acted appropriately.

His response was clear. He had not done the right thing. Duran shows that there are 8 issues all adding up to the fact that there is no halakhic justification for the release from the oath. The eighth one is that R. Ephraim had said that the two families were compelled, and thus the oath was no longer in force. The compulsion was that the



Arabs who controlled the town they lived in told them that the men could go to Eretz Yisrael, but that the women and children had to stay behind. Duran even puts the exact words of Pharaoh from the Torah in the mouths of the Arab rulers. And he goes on to explain: "because of this the men refrained from leaving the town, for their feelings of compassion for their women and children were very great and they could not leave them, and thus they were as if compelled not to leave." (**Yakhin u-Boaz, I, 58**)

Normally, compulsion which invalidates an oath is a kind of compulsion that exists at the time the oath is taken. Still, compelling factors that occur after the oath is taken may be sufficient to release one from an oath, if those factors are unusual and could not have been foreseen at the time the oath was taken. (cf. Duran *ibid.*) But, that is precisely the point why Duran does not allow the release to stand. The fact that the Arabs controlled the town was known before the oath was taken. The fact that they would most likely not allow the women and children to leave was also well known at the time. Since they did not write those facts down specifically as a reason that would prevent them from fulfilling the oath, so Duran rules, they cannot now appeal to that well known behavior of the Arab rulers. So, according to Duran, these men must keep their oath and join their fellows going to Israel, even though their women and children may be forced to stay behind.

Still, it seems as if this is a theoretical halakhic ruling. He understands the feelings of the men, and in some sense accepts the reality of their decision not to leave their families behind. The pull of the sense of love, partnership, and community within the family outweighs pure reasoning.

**\*Ex. 10, 28 – 29; 11, 8**

<sup>28</sup>Pharaoh said to him, "Be gone from me! Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die." <sup>29</sup>And Moses replied, "You have spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again!"

<sup>8</sup>Then all these courtiers of yours shall come down to me and bow low to me, saying, 'Depart, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will depart." And he left Pharaoh's presence in hot anger.

Once again, the chronology of the verses and the language seem to be confused. At the end of Chapter 10 Moses is ushered in to Pharaoh just before the final plague. At this audience Pharaoh becomes angry with Moses, who toes a hard line and gives no response to Pharaoh's hints of compromise. The chapter ends: "Pharaoh said to him, "Be gone from me! Take care not to see me again, for the moment you look upon my face you shall die." And Moses replied, "You have spoken rightly. I shall not see your face again!"' (Ex. 10, 28-29)

So, this should be the last time that they see each other. But, chapter 11 opens with an account of another meeting that will take place AFTER the tenth plague has occurred. The climax of this meeting is: "Then all these courtiers of yours shall come down to me and bow low to me, saying, 'Depart, you and all the people who follow you!' After that I will depart." And he left Pharaoh's presence in hot anger." (Ex. 11, 8) It is not clear if this belongs with the audience in chapter 10, or if it belongs to the audience that occurs in chapter 12, 31-33. If the former, why is it separated from the dialogue above? If the latter, why does it appear before the meeting is recorded?

Also, it seems to contradict the final words of the first meeting in which both agree that they will see each other no more!

One of the questions relating to this passage in the Talmud has to do with Moses' "hot anger" when he leaves Pharaoh's presence the first time. The Talmud asks: doesn't "hot anger" always leave a lasting impression? Moses leaves in hot anger, but there is not a word about what impression, if any, this left on Pharaoh? Perhaps, Moses' indignation made no impression? (**Zevachim 102a**) Resh Lakish says that what happened was that Moses, in his hot anger, slapped Pharaoh across the face and left in a huff. Hot anger may be expressed in ways other than words, and it is clear that a slap leaves an impression, in many ways!

Still, the Talmud is not satisfied with this answer. It questions whether Resh Lakish really held that view? For elsewhere he says that Moses behaved respectfully towards Pharaoh, rather, it was R. Yohanan who held that Moses' was insolent towards the king. R. Yannai ends the discussion by saying that one must always be deferential to the king. This idea is taken from an early Midrash which says that God specifically commanded Moses and Aaron to be respectful of the king. (cf. **Mekhilta d'R. Ishmael Bo, mass. D'pasha, 13**)

How does our verse show that Moses was respectful? Because he says to Pharaoh "Then all these courtiers of yours shall come down to me and bow low to me...", while NOT saying that Pharaoh himself will come down to him, he saves face for the king. This interpretation assumes that this verse should be seen as being part of the first audience at the end of Chapter 10. This verse is thus some kind of foreshadow of the future in which Moses respects the office of the king by pretending to agree that he will not see him any more, rather the king's servants will be the ones to see Moses and beg him to take the Israelites and leave. While we, the reader, know that it will really be the king himself who will do that.

There is a Midrash that interprets our verse in another way altogether. It analyzes Moses' words, "Then all these courtiers of yours ("khol avadekha eleh") shall come down to me", in this way: the word "eleh", "these", is superfluous. It implies that some will go down, and others will not! What does Moses mean? This Midrash has it this way: Moses says that these servants will "go down" into the sea, as opposed to the first born who will be slain in the plague.

The Midrash continues: "When the Egyptians heard that the first born were to die, they said to each other, every one of us has four or five sons and if the first born die, these others will survive. When the first born saw that their fathers gave up on them, they stormed Pharaoh, and asked him to find a way to save them. Pharaoh said to them, 'before I save you, I will find a way to save myself'. When the first born understood that Pharaoh had rejected their cause, they rallied together and killed their 600,000 fathers." (**Pesikta Rabbati Hosafa alef chap. 2**)

This fascinating and bold Midrash understands our verse to be a foreshadowing of revolt against the king by the Egyptians themselves! Pharaoh does nothing to alleviate the certain suffering of the first born. He apparently joins in the false and immoral approach that says it is alright to let some sons die as long as there are others. By ignoring the plight of the individual for a totally generalized view,

Pharaoh supplies justification for an insurrection against him and against every family head in Egypt. It is a powerful Midrash which spells out the callousness and indifference of power to the plight of every single person in the kingdom, and locates the reason for the fall of the kingdom precisely in this callousness and indifference.

**\*Ex. 11, 1-2**

*And the LORD said to Moses, "I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all. <sup>2</sup>Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold."*

In parasha Bo we read of the tenth plague, the slaying of the firstborn. It is certainly the most horrific plague, and it is the last one. Because of it Egypt is brought to its knees, and the children of Israel are sent free. God introduces it thus: "And the LORD said to Moses, "I will bring but one more plague upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall let you go from here ["yeshalah etchem mi-zeh"]; indeed, when he lets you go, he will drive you out of here one and all ["ke-shalho kallah garesh yegaresh etchem mi-zeh"]. Tell the people to borrow, each man from his neighbor and each woman from hers, objects of silver and gold." (Ex. 11:1-2) God tells Moses that Pharaoh will send them away, drive them out, and that the people should have borrowed valuables from the Egyptians beforehand in order to take them when they are driven out.

This incident is part of what God reveals to Moses in the desert (cf. 3:19-22) Indeed both elements are present in these verses as well, being driven out and taking gold and silver. Most of the commentaries of this story relate to the taking of valuables as something which the Israelites had coming to them, as the compensation for their years of slavery. Indeed, it is usually interpreted as a kind of "severance pay" which the Egyptians owed to them. Because they could not hope to collect what was owed by appealing to the Egyptian courts, they were permitted to collect in the manner specified.

But, what is most fascinating to me is the first element. Why is it necessary for Pharaoh to drive the people out? God has defeated Egypt, and brought them all to their knees. The gates are down, the army is probably not functioning, why does God not simply say to Moses, "now you can leave"? What is behind the need to go and have Pharaoh proclaim his disdain for the people and drive them out, "garesh yegaresh"?

**Ramban** interprets this as the need for Pharaoh to make it clear that not only can Israel leave Egypt, but it is forbidden for them to stay (cf. **on Ex. 12:31**). Perhaps he is hinting that the mentality of Israel is that they would not go if not forced out! It had to be made clear to them that they were not going to be allowed to hang around. Indeed, given the constant requests of the people to return to Egypt, perhaps Ramban has captured a psychological need of the people. This is also the direction of **Or ha-Hayyim on this verse**. He connects it with 11:1, namely that Pharaoh will send out ALL of the Israelites, not one will remain, not even the women and children.

The Hebrew syntax of our phrase is difficult: "yeshalah etchem mi-zeh, ke-shalho kallah garesh yegaresh etchem mi-zeh". The first part, "yeshalah etchem mi-zeh",

can be easily rendered literally as “he will send you from here”. The last part, “garesh yegaresh etchem mi-zeh”, can also be rendered easily as “he will surely drive you out from here”. These two phrases are actually a clear example of Biblical style parallelism. But, what is the meaning of the phrase “ke-shalho kallah”? Why is it stuck in the middle of these parallel phrases?

At first glance it looks like a metaphor, because of the prefix “ke”, “like”. Yet, almost none of the commentators take it in that fashion. They all relate to the word “kallah” as a form of the noun “to finish”, and take the phrase to mean “every single one of you”, “all of you”. This is also what underlies Hayyim ibn Attar’s comment mentioned above.

But, to one who is sensitive to Hebrew, the phrase, when heard alone, can seem to say “like he sends forth a bride”, or “as a woman is sent forth”. Indeed, the wording of divorce is that the husband “sends her forth from his house” (cf. Deut. 24:1ff). Is this the metaphor? Israel has to be sent away from by Pharaoh because they are like a bride or a servant being sent away from their home?! If this is the image being created by this phrase, that might explain why Pharaoh must actively give the order to leave. Since divorce is a severing of a relationship by both sides, it is not enough for Israel to just walk out. Perhaps this gives another possible view of the valuables taken from the Egyptians, a kind of Ketubbah being paid to enable the sent away bride to get along, or the gifts given to a servant sent away so that they can get along (cf. Deut. 15:13; compare with Ex. 3:21).

**Jacob b. Asher**, the Baal ha-Turim, is the only one who implies this understanding. He does so by putting Pharaoh’s sending Israel away into a much wider moral context, the context of Sarah’s sending away Hagar and Ishmael from their home. He writes: “there are three “driven out’s” (“garesh”) in the tradition. “drive out the maidservant” (Gen. 21:10), “drive out the scoffer” (Prov. 22:10), “drive out them all (or the bride)” (“kallah garesh yegaresh”, Ex. 11:1). “cast out the slave woman and her son” and thus you cast out the scoffer (Ishmael). And because Sarah drove Hagar out of her house, her descendants were punished and enslaved themselves, and thus HAD to be cast out from there.”

Baal ha-Turim sees the NEED for Pharaoh to drive Israel out, as a final step in the punishment of Sarah’s descendants for the act of driving Hagar and Ishmael from the house. In a moral vision of extreme sensitivity, Jacob b. Asher senses that even though God wanted Israel to be free, and even though God had the power to take them out of Egypt, with no reference to Pharaoh necessary at all, still there was a lesson to be learned by having Pharaoh send them away. Namely, that one cannot drive others away, without having to pay a price for it. Israel, whom God redeems from slavery, has to learn the soul of the slave (cf. Ex. 23:9), so that it never treats others that way again. They have to learn, that although God wants them free, and is willing to perform miracles to secure their freedom, God still insists that they be driven out like any other slave, to make up for what was done, and to learn how to behave in the future. **TTT 91 T and M**

**\*Ex. 12, 1 - 2**

*The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt: <sup>2</sup>This month shall mark for you the beginning of the months; it shall be the first of the months of the year for you.*

This week's parasha contains the laws relating to Pesah Mitzrayim and Pesah Dorot (Ex. 12). This chapter starts with the words "ha-hodesh ha-zeh lachem..." "this month is for you...". There are many midrashim on these words, and one of them relates to the word "ha-zeh", "this" interpreting it to mean pointing to something specific. This is well attested in the Midrash, that "zeh" implies pointing, or specifying something. The midrash points out that the new moon ("ha-hodesh") was one of four things which Moses did not understand, and God pointed to them with His finger in order that Moses see how it was to be.

This is a striking metaphor. Each one of these ritual items requires specific knowledge, seeing how the thing looks. Without this visual knowledge, the conceptualization of the real thing, the laws alone are not intelligible. God, always the perfect pedagogue, uses visual techniques to point out to Moses literally what they are (an early video or slide projector perhaps?) The four items which need illustration are: the sacred oil of anointment, the Menorah, unclean creeping things, and the new moon.

This Midrash (**Ex. Rabbah (Vilna) 15:28**) then goes on to describe, just how God did this "pointing", and it connects it up with Psalm 29, which is so familiar to us from the Siddur. God shook up the oceans to show those unclean things "Kol hashem al ha-mayim", shook up the forests to show the turtle "Kol hashem shover arazim", shook up the desert "Kol hashem yachil midbar", shook up the fire to show the salamander (thought to be connected with fire in folklore) "Kol hashem Chotzev lehavot Esh". He then shook up the world and showed Moses the new Moon "Kol hashem ba-koach", and the Menorah "Kol hashem be-hadar", and the sacred ointment "Kol hashem yeholel ayyalot", "va-yehesof yearot" implies showing the ingredients of the ointment made from plants.

What is amazing about this midrash is the connection between "kol" and the instructions given to Moses, showing him how to perform the mitzvot in question. We usually think of the verses of this psalm as expressing God's power, but here the Midrash transforms our understanding by using the word "kol" in the Rabbinic sense of "rumor", "knowledge" and "reputation". Rabbinic usage refers to a "kol" as a rumor of a wedding, the spreading of a reputation that so-and-so have been married, and this leads to a fixing of their status. It is not God's power alone which is revealed when we look at these verses, but we see the rumor of God in each of these things, and God's reputation becomes clear to us. God reveals meaning to us in the world, grants us knowledge about how to transform the physical objects of the world into ritual holiness. Thus, God's reputation is established when we hear the "echoes" of his teaching of Moses. **TTT 92 H and M**

**\*Exodus 13, 6 - 10**

*"Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the LORD. Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found with you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory. And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free*

*from Egypt.' "And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead (lit. "between your eyes") – in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth – that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt. You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year."*

Parashat Bo contains the commands relating to Passover. Hazal discerned in this section two sets of commands, those relating to the Passover in Egypt before the exodus, and those relating to Passover for all coming generations. At the end of parashat Bo we have the following formulation of the Passover for all generations:

"Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, and on the seventh day there shall be a festival of the LORD. Throughout the seven days unleavened bread shall be eaten; no leavened bread shall be found with you, and no leaven shall be found in all your territory. And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the LORD did for me when I went free from Egypt.' "And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead (lit. "between your eyes") – in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth – that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt. You shall keep this institution at its set time from year to year." (Exodus 13:6-10)

All the verses in this section seem to refer to the laws surrounding the Passover holiday, and they are familiar to us until this very day. But, verse 9 seems to be out of place. What does "And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead – in order that the Teaching of the LORD may be in your mouth – that with a mighty hand the LORD freed you from Egypt" have to do with Passover? The connection to leaving Egypt seems to be the only connection. But, there are many questions raised by this verse. What is the sign on your hand and the reminder on your forehead? If the sign of the hand connects to the "mighty hand" of the Lord, this might answer the question for that sign. But, what is the sign, and what of the forehead?

Tradition assumes that these "signs" are the Tefillin. Tefillin which are wrapped on the arm, and placed on the forehead. But, we know that the command of Tefillin is to be performed every weekday, and not on Passover, or certainly not JUST on Passover, as verse 10 would imply. One Midrash interprets this verse, and Tefillin in the context of dealing with the ideal and the real. R. Eliezer has the people of Israel saying to the Holy One that they really want to be engaged in Torah study day and night, but THEY HAVE NO FREE TIME. God says to them: "keep the commandment of Tefillin, and I will consider it as if you have been busy with Torah day and night." (**Midrash Tehillim, 1:17**). Upon hearing this, R. Yohanan exclaims: "this notion is explicit in a Torah verse: "And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead (lit. "between your eyes") – in order that the Teaching ("Torah") of the LORD may be in your mouth."

The problem as put by R. Eliezer is the conflict between the ideal and reality. Ideally one should engage in Torah all the time, but people must work, engage in family activities, etc. The free time to study Torah is very little. The suggestion is that one must do something which will enable us to study Torah WITHIN A REASONABLE FRAMEWORK OF TIME. The answer is the commandment of Tefillin, which I take to mean the putting on of Tefillin and the recitation of, at least the Keri'at Shema. I

say at least Keriat Shema because of the continuation of the same Midrash which puts Keriat Shema into the same type of rubric as Tefillin. Perhaps the intention is the whole prayer service of each morning, which on some mornings includes Torah study in the service.

An extension of this notion can be found in a striking Midrash which uses our same verse. In commenting on the opening verse of Terumah: "bring to me gifts" ("va-yikhu li terumah"), this Midrash opens our eyes to a new possible meaning of the word "li", "to me". God says to Israel:

"the Torah was mine, "in order that the Teaching ("Torah") of the LORD may be in your mouth" (Ex. 13:9) [i.e. the Torah belongs to the Lord], and Justice was mine, as it says: "for justice belongs to God" (Deut. 1:17). You have taken them [for yourselves], take me with them." (**Yalkut Shimoni, Terumah, 364**).

Humanity has appropriated what was God's to begin with. Torah and Justice are claimed by humans, but when they take those instruments they must take God along with them. One can never lose a sense of the Divine when studying Torah, or administering justice. These are not totally human creations, and to lose sight of that may be to turn these very instruments into idolatrous creations of human thought alone. Indeed, the idea of this Midrash is that Torah alone without sensibility of the Divine, or justice alone without awareness of the Divine, may be destructive rather than productive.

Wrapping oneself in Tefillin is a ritual act, but it is an act which physically binds one to the Divine. Torah that goes along with it has a deeper spiritual connection. It is a way of "taking God" along while engaging in Torah. But, it also, because of our verses, creates a daily physical reminder of the exodus from Egypt. "Taking God along" with us every day deepens our sense of personal freedom, and is truly an expression of the deepest values of Judaism. **TTT 93 Heschel and T**

**\*Ex. 13, 14 - 16**

<sup>14</sup>*And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the LORD brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage. <sup>15</sup>When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew every first-born in the land of Egypt, the first-born of both man and beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my sons.'*

<sup>16</sup>*"And so it shall be as a sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the LORD freed us from Egypt."*

These same passages are used in the famous Midrash of the four sons which is in the Passover Haggadah. The first mention is: "And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.' And this shall serve you as a sign on your hand and as a reminder on your forehead - in order that the Teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth - that with a mighty hand the Lord freed you from Egypt." (Ex. 13, 8-9)

The second mention is: "And when, in time to come, your son asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.... "And so it shall be as a

sign upon your hand and as a symbol on your forehead that with a mighty hand the Lord freed us from Egypt." (Ex. 13, 14 and 16)

In both texts the idea of Tefillin, a sign upon the hand and the head, is connected with answering a child's question about the rituals of Passover. The phrase in Exodus 13, 9 "in order that the Teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth" ["lema'an tihyeh torat adonai be-fikha"], literally "with the goal that God's Torah will be in your mouth", is striking. First, because the Hebrew "lema'an" signifies much more than a reason. It implies that this is a goal, the desired result of successfully keeping this commandment. Yet, Tefillin have to do with arms and foreheads. They are physical appurtenances, highly ritualized. The Torah, or at least parts of it, are hidden inside leather boxes. So, what can the phrase about "Torah being in your mouth" mean in the context of Tefillin?

We have seen one statement of R. Eliezer, that Tefillin is a kind of symbolic study of Torah. (**Masekhet Tefillin 1, 20; cf. Midrash Tehillim 1, 17** where Israel complains that they have "no time" to ponder Torah day and night.)

It seems as if R. Eliezer is explaining the "meaning" of the Tefillin ritual. The physical strapping of Torah bits to one's body, an action that does leave "a sign" for a while, acts out the ideal situation where Torah is part of our thoughts and speech all the time. Indeed, some sources connect this ideal goal of Jewish life with the exodus from Egypt. That is, the goal of the exodus was to enable Jews to relate to Torah around the clock. Thus the ritual expresses both the means, the exodus, and the goal, Torah, precisely at the time when they are part and parcel of my body and being. (cf. **Akedat Yitzhak, sha'ar 38**)

On the other hand, some people have understood R. Eliezer literally, namely that putting on Tefillin fulfills the mitzvah of thinking of Torah all the time. For these people the symbol and what is symbolized are fused. On the face of it, this is a clear logical mistake. Yet, there are so many Jews today, and in the past, that fused the symbol and its meaning in so many of the mitzvot, that it is hard to deny that this is a method found in Jewish thought. While to us this fusion of symbolic action and inner thought or moral purpose smacks of magic or at least wishful thinking, it is a common and widespread mindset in the Jewish world. The rationalist distinctions are not always easy to uphold, even for a rationalist. For example, in prayers for the sick. Indeed, some modern scientific studies suggest that there are statistically significant results in prayer for women undergoing fertility treatments. (cf. **Journal of Reproductive Medicine, Sept. 2001**) TTT 94 T and B

**R. Yitzhak Arama** discusses our chapter and finds there two distinct "lessons", as he calls them, regarding how to relate to the mitzvot of Passover observance and Tefillin. One lesson is for, what he calls, the "deficient person" ("ha-ish ha-haser"). This person can comprehend things only if they are practical and concrete. This person always needs to know the utility to themselves of any action. This is the one of whom it is written in our parasha: "And you shall explain to your son on that day, 'It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt.'" (Ex. 13, 8) When you make this known to such a person, they understand that it is because of these deeds, e. g. eating matzah and maror, that God took Israel out of Egypt. The Tefillin, as a sign that "the Teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth", does not



apply to such a person. Tefillin as concrete expression ONLY hints that such a person will not be able to fathom the Exodus from a deep understanding. That is, the Tefillin as "substitute" for having Torah in our mouths is only for those who cannot see beyond the concrete, beyond the utilitarian. It does NOT become Torah in any way, rather it is a "deficient" physical expression which is, nonetheless, important as a physical expression. To my mind, the concrete is important even for those who think they are beyond materialism and utilitarianism.

For those people bound by the concrete, the Haggadah says, "you must begin teaching...". This lesson is stressed in the Haggadah by adding that the teaching can only begin when the matzah and maror are set in front of such a person, that is, one should be careful to mention only material concrete things to such a person.

This is said of the person who "does not ask". Arama writes that this is one who is not motivated to question, as is the wise son. The wise son asks, and the question also could be seen as a challenge to the simple material explanation. For the one who does not query, we should avoid philosophical discussions of Divine intention, and avoid queries that call into question the literal sense of the text or of the mitzvot. This is because these people can only fathom that the cause of Divine intervention is some physical actions of humans. (**Akedat Yitzhak Sha'ar 38**) For Arama our phrase "the Teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth" can only apply to one who can query. The Tefillin are concrete, but the one with God's Torah in his mouth is the one who can question all, the one who can go beyond "defending the faith", and delve into applications of the basis of the faith to new and to different situations. One who can keep Torah alive by contradicting it. Indeed, the wise son questions the very idea of cause and effect between eating matzah and liberation, and yet this is the ideal, for it is the opportunity to delve deeply into the relationship between matzah and freedom, without assuming cause and effect. **TTT 94 T and B**

\*I want to suggest another interpretation of the Haggadah passage that continues Arama's point. The Haggadah states "mi she-eino yodea lishol, at petah lo", "one who does not know how to ask, you begin teaching him". But, I want to take the Hebrew literally. The word "petah", which is usually understood to mean "begin teaching", literally means "to open up". I suggest that the Haggadah is saying, "if a person does not know how to question, open them up so that they can learn to question"! Perhaps the "deficient person" can be opened and become less deficient. Perhaps by studying Torah, that is Oral Torah, they can learn to not be afraid to query. After all the Torah tells us that Moses' arms, lifted up, caused Israel to win the war against Amalek. (Ex. 17, 11-13) The Mishnah questions the idea that the Torah is implying cause and effect between Moses' arms and war. (**RH 3, 8**) Furthermore, the Mishnah rejects this implication, and it does so in a general context of rejecting materialistic cause and effect between performing mitzvot and outcomes in the world. **TTT 94 T and B**

Sefer Hasidim also discusses the Jew whose motivation to observe mitzvot is based on material utilitarian benefit. It adds, however, a significant dimension to this discussion. The study of Torah on Shabbat is meant to come closer to the ideal of "day and night", and thus one should go over the Torah twice and, in addition, use a translation or commentary to go over it another time ("shnaim mikra ve-ehad targum"). This custom, it is written, gives one long life. Sefer Hasidim raises the question of a Jew who says that life is bad. This person is suffering, longer life is no

attraction to them; they would rather end their life sooner, and so they refuse to go over the Torah 3 times. (**Sefer Hasidim 301**)

Sefer Hasidim (SH) points out that such a person treats the "rewards" promised in the Torah, or the "punishments", in the way a day laborer treats his contract. If he doesn't like the work, or is not afraid of the punishment, he just doesn't do what the contract calls for. SH points out that the relationship to God and the mitzvot, however, is more like that of a servant, who cannot put conditions on his master. The obligation to fulfill God's "contract" exists independent of our own wishes. Since God has given humans free will to do good or evil at their choosing, the only incentive that God can give to those people who act only out of utilitarian interest is to offer good rewards. So, the rewards specified in the Torah and in tradition are **ONLY** meant for those people who, in any case, judge everything by the concrete and the utilitarian outcome. **TTT 94 T and B**

The stated rewards are **NOT** meant for the other class of people who do mitzvot and serve God out of love. It would be impossible to write down rewards for those who serve out of love, says SH, because, just as there is no bounds to love, there is no bounds to the rewards of love.

The only thing one can say about a person who serves God out of love, and that service, as we have seen, may even be by deep questioning of the Torah, is that "the Teaching of the Lord may be in your mouth". This type of person, an ideal to be pursued, does always have the teaching of the Lord in their mouths and hearts. Even for a person who is tired of life, love of Torah and speaking of it remain sources of comfort and fortification. My uncle, Rabbi Jolt z"l, talked Torah until the day he died, and it was only in those few moments of Torah that the tiredness of living was relieved. **TTT 94 T and B**

In this view, Mitzvat Tefillin becomes a way of "loving". The very act of tying them on is an act of creating ties, it is a binding in love. In modern Hebrew the root "kasher", to tie, is also the root of the word "communication" ("tikshoret"). Thus, Tefillin are seen as a means of communicating, and as such, even though they are inherently very physical, they enter our spiritual world and enrich it with a tie of love to God. But, this physical token of love, being tied to God, is not meant to constrain the spirit. The Tefillin should go **TOGETHER WITH** God's Torah in one's mouth, together with always "speaking of them" (Deut. 6, 7), together with "in your heart and in your mouth to do them" (Deut. 30, 14). The concrete act of love should be accompanied by a mind and spirit which is open to any query about the compassion and righteousness of the Torah, with the goal of making those values clearly manifest in the world. **TTT 94 T and B**

As we have seen, the commandment of Tefillin is mentioned twice at the end of parashat Bo. At least, that is the traditional view of these verses: "it shall be a sign upon your hand, and a remembrance between your eyes..." (Ex. 13:9, 16).

Is this the right interpretation of those verses? This question is raised by Ibn Ezra, and in the way which he deals with this one issue, we can learn some of the general rules of how our tradition understood the words of the Torah.

**Ibn Ezra on Ex. 13:9:** "There are those who disagree with our holy ancestors, and they (those who disagree) say that the meaning of "sign and remembrance" (*ot, zikaron*) is metaphoric, as in the verse: "they are a graceful design on your head, like a necklace around your neck" (Prov. 1:9). Furthermore, they (those who disagree) say that "you shall bind them for a sign on your hand" (Deut. 6:8) is metaphoric, as in the verse: "bind them to your heart forever" (Prov. 6:21). Furthermore, they (those who disagree) say "and write them on the doorposts of your house" (Deut. 6:9) is metaphoric, as in the verse: "write them on the slate of your heart" (Prov. 3:3). Thus, our verse (Ex. 13:9), which states that these acts should be a "sign and remembrance" (*ot, zikaron*), is to be taken metaphorically, namely that the thought that God took us out of Egypt with a mighty hand should be constant and always with us."

The anonymous dissenters are apparently reading the verses in Ex. "It shall be a sign..." as a metaphor, not that something should be literally tied to one's arm. It is harder for them to make this point as regards the verses in Deut., where the verb "to bind them" (*u-keshartem*) is used. But, these exegetes show from various verses in Proverbs, that the use of "bind" can also be metaphoric (e.g. 6:21). **Ibn Ezra** understands that the point of this dissent is that the verses merely mean to say that there are many mitzvot which cause us to remember the fact that God took us out of Egypt with a strong hand. These commands, such as eating Matzah on Passover, telling our children about it, (**cf. Ex. 13:7-8**), and our redeeming the firstborn (**cf. Ex. 13:13-15**), are the context in which the Torah says that we need a sign and remembrance. They are the commands, which act as the sign and remembrance, NOT tying leather boxes to one's arm and forehead. **TTT 95 T and B**

Ibn Ezra continues: "This is not the correct way to understand these verses. For at the beginning of the book [of Proverbs] we are told that it is "Solomon's proverbs (metaphors) (**Prov. 1:1**). Thus, everything in the book is metaphoric. Nowhere in the Torah does it specify that the words of the Torah are metaphors. The Torah is to be taken in its plain sense, and we cannot remove it from its plain sense, unless the plain sense defies common sense, such as "you shall circumcise the foreskin of your hearts" (Deut. 10:16). In such a case we will have to emend our understanding of it according to our reason. R. Moshe ha-Kohen [ibn Jikatilla], pointed out that the word "yad" in most of the Bible means the left hand. "My hand formed the earth, my right hand the heavens" (Isa. 48:13), "she put her hand on the stake, and her right hand to strike" (Judges 5:26). In any case, such a strong tradition needs no other support."

First, Ibn Ezra makes the point that the book of Proverbs is meant to be taken metaphorically, and it announces that fact in the first verse. The Torah is not meant to be taken in this way. Seeing the Torah as a book which is meant to deal with reality, and not as a book which merely describes a way of thinking, is a very crucial point about Judaism in general. **TTT 95 T and B** The case of Tefillin is a good example. All of the verses that speak of having God in mind or in your heart do not explain the plain language of the Torah which assumes a clear need to have a physical symbol of that presence. Ibn Ezra does point out that even though the general approach of the Torah is to be taken literally, there are cases which defy reason and sense, and those verses have to be dealt with by reason. They may be explained metaphorically, or in other ways. **TTT 95 T and B**

Finally, he quotes R. Moshe b. Shemuel who interprets the word "yadekha", "on your hand" to mean "the left hand", giving linguistic support for that idea in Biblical usage. It is interesting that, as matter of fact, the word hand in the Bible, if not specified, is the left. Thus, this gives linguistic support to the tradition that Tefillin are to be put on the left hand. Actually, Ibn Ezra might have pointed to the use of "al-yad" in the Torah to show that this phrase almost always means physically putting something on your hand!!! (cf. Gen. 24:22,30,47; 27:16; 38:28; 41:41 etc.). The Hebrew phrase "al-yad", could mean "near", or it could mean "by virtue of", both meanings could lend credence to the metaphoric interpretation. However, those are not the usage's of that phrase in the Torah. On the contrary, in the Torah, this phrase almost always denotes placing something on the arm, and this usage supports the interpretation that the Ex. verses imply Tefillin.

Finally, Ibn Ezra points to the weight of tradition. If this interpretation is so well attested for so many years, it does not need to be defended against such flimsy arguments. Ibn Ezra probably did not know of the Tefillin found in the Judean Desert from the time of the second Temple and from the time of Bar Kokhba. These archeological finds lend weighty support to his interpretation.

After describing the Passover rituals, the Torah adds: "And when, in time to come ("mahar"), your son asks you, saying, 'What does this mean?' ("mah zot") you shall say to him, 'It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage.'" (Ex. 13, 14) The rituals confuse the lad, and he asks what it all means, and a succinct answer is prescribed to reply to the question.

This passage is very well known to most Jews because of its role in the Seder night. It is the proof text brought to illustrate a type of child called in the Haggadah of Passover, "tam". While it is clear that the intent of the passage is to declare that parents are responsible to explain to their children why they perform certain rituals, and to make sure that the historic provenance of these rituals is also explained to their children. But, just what are the parameters of this obligation? One unclear area is that of timing. What does the word "mahar" mean? When is one obligated to explain these things?

One tradition in the midrash explains that the word "mahar", rendered here as 'in time to come', is ambiguous. In modern Hebrew this word is commonly used for "tomorrow". But, our midrash notes there are some tomorrows that are immediate, and there are some tomorrows which are a long way off. But, this is precisely the point of using such a word. There are multiple opportunities to educate the young about history and practice. One need not save the opportunity for some special or festive occasion. By using such a word which has both time frames associated with it, the Torah is implying that a parent is always obligated to show children how the connections to tradition apply. (cf. **Mekhila d'R. Ishmael, Bo, d'Pasha 18**)

In a similar fashion a midrashic tradition relates to the verse's words "when, in time to come ("mahar"), your son asks you". Does this mean that one is obligated to explain only when a child asks? The answer is that in the same chapter the Torah tells us: "ve-higadata le-vinkha" (Ex. 13, 8), you must tell your child. Thus, we see that the parent is obligated to teach the child, even if not asked. Furthermore, what about the situation in which one is sitting alone or with other people? The answer

again is that the Torah tells us: "Moses says to the people "remember this day" (Ex. 13, 3), that is, one must always delve into these issues. (**Mekhilta d'R. Shimon Bar Yohai, 13, 3**)

The idea that a Jew has a primary obligation to study and reflect on the Exodus and all of the rituals which are allied to it is a very central theme. There is no question that this enterprise is central to Jewish identity. Many daily and festival rituals stem from the Exodus story, and the main pillar of Jewish law and ethics is also grounded in the details of this narrative. No wonder that it is to be seen as something that must be in our consciousness all the time, and something that is worthy of study at all times. Also, it is clear that it must be transmitted to the next generation, for they are also obligated to continue the reflection on the events of the Exodus into the future.

Since this verse is used in the famous Midrash of the four sons, it is also interpreted in light of this usage. R. Moshe Alshekh wonders why does the child ask about this particular ritual? If they are wise they will understand all the mitzvot, and if they are simple they should ask this question about every mitzvah! His answer is that the child understands the ritual, but what bothers is the answer "It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage." It seems as if R. Moshe sees the question as responding to the statement. The child is asking, why does the exodus need a "mighty hand" whereas the entry into the land of Israel does not? His answer is that the people who entered the land were righteous, and thus did not need extra help from God in the form of so many powerful miracles. Whereas, those who left Egypt were not as righteous, and thus God needed to 'push things along'. (**Sefer Torat Moshe Ex. 3, 11-16**)

Now, this answer is fascinating. The mighty hand is interpreted as the miraculous intervention by God. The nation is mostly passive, and God has to work on their behalf. The reason is that the people themselves are flawed. Perhaps it is the years of exile and servitude that has made them less able to take their fate into their hands, in any case, they are unable to do it, and thus, there is a 'strong hand'. **TTT 96 B and E**

One other commentator offers a striking interpretation. R. Yitzhak Arama asks about the four sons, and questions who is the antithesis of who? We usually think that the wise one ("hakham") is the antithesis of the evil one ("rasha"). But, R. Arama disagrees. For him the antithesis of the evil one is our child, the "tam". He interprets "tam" to mean a person of integrity, whereas the "rasha" is a person without integrity. Thus the evil one taunts his parents by saying that their rituals are good for them, but not for him. The son of integrity accepts the parents attempts and gladly goes along with them, but he simply wants to know what is being done and why. It is not a 'simple' question, as we usually translate it, but it is simply a question looking for straight answers to a system already accepted as valuable. (**Akedat Yitzhak Gate 38**) **TTT 96 B and E**

What is even more fascinating is that this reading leaves the antithesis of the wise one being the one who does not know how to ask. So, a scornful attitude, lacking in integrity and no interest in asking questions are negative attributes which parents should strive mightily to avoid inculcating in their children. On the other hand, the quality of integrity and the quality of questioning are two positive attributes which

we need to cultivate in our children, and in ourselves, in order to make the study of the Exodus story bear fruit. **TTT 96 B and E**

**\*Ex. 13, 18**

*So God led the people roundabout, by way of the wilderness at the Sea of Reeds. Now the Israelites went up armed out of the land of Egypt.*

The second verse in this week's parasha contains one of those phrases which has been explicated in the Midrash in a most provocative fashion. As a result it also became the subject of many sermons. The phrase in Hebrew is "ve-hamushim alu benei yisrael me-eret mitzrayim" (Ex. 13:18). "The children of Israel went up out of Egypt ....". The difficulty is the word "hamushim". The normally accepted meaning is "armed" or "fortified with arms". And this meaning is specified by the Midrash as the only correct one ("ein hamushim eleh mezuyanim") "the word 'hamushim' can only mean armed". The root of the word appears to be "hamesh" or "five". How does a numerical word become to mean "arms"?

Perhaps the Midrash is so adamant about saying that the word can only mean "armed", because of the astounding interpretation recorded along side this simple meaning. This Midrash states that the word signifies a part of five. One rabbi says that the verse means that only one in five of the people Israel went out of Egypt, another says it means one in 50, another says one in 500, and R. Nehorai says it means one in 5000! (**Mekhilta de-Rashbi, 13,18; Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael, va-yehi be-shallah, mavo**; Cf. My commentary in The Masorti Haggadah in three languages).

The rabbinic tradition assumes that the overwhelming majority of Jews in slavery in Egypt did not go out with Moses! Why is that so? Did they not see the miraculous plagues which God brought on Egypt? Did they not hear of Moses's mission in the name of God? If we assume that Moses' task was to take all of the children of Israel out of Egypt, how is it that he failed at that task? As a rabbi, this Midrash gives great comfort, if Moshe Rabbeinu with the manifestation of the plagues could only get 20%, at best, to follow along, then we are doing alright. Still, the question bothers. Why did the message which Moses brought to the people not get to so many of them?

I want to suggest that perhaps God is also to blame, in that his orders to Moses were faulty. God tells Moses to return to Egypt and to bring the message of God's concern and salvation to "the leaders of the people" ("zikenei ha-am" cf. Ex. 3:16). Moses spoke only to the leadership. He, and apparently God also, did not realize that the message was not delivered to the people. They were not part of the process. (For the use of "ha-am" to mean ONLY the leadership cf. Nehama Leibowitz on Ex. 1).

If Moses, and God, expected that the leaders would speak to the people, and convince them or at least make them a part of the process, their expectations were not fulfilled. The message remained on the level of the leadership, and many Jews were skeptical. Perhaps they thought that it was a crazy idea of the leadership. Indeed, we know that the leadership itself had doubts about being able to survive in the desert, and they expressed them (cf. 14:11-12 etc.). If Moses was not able to dispel the doubts of the leadership, what chance did he have of reaching most of the people, if he did not directly communicate with them. I believe that God learns from this experience. At the giving of the Torah on Sinai it is specified that all the people were

told to be present, and that all were included in the covenant which was spoken from the mountain.

Now, it is our turn to learn from this. If we wish to establish Pluralistic Judaism in Israel, we must go to the people with ideas, with explanations, commentaries. We must engage the people in connecting up to Jewish sources and Jewish living. We must communicate with all the people. There is a vast marketplace of ideas competing for the minds and hearts of Israelis, and our product is not on the shelf! We have to put it there in the best light possible and with the widest distribution possible.

There is a great need to open channels of communication to Jewish civilization and its sources for the Israeli public. One of the spiritual needs of each person is a connection to the cultural sources of their national identity. The growing alienation towards Jewish civilization among many Israelis leaves this need unfulfilled. This unfulfilled need leads to internal conflict within the individual and makes it harder to achieve a positive Jewish identity among Israelis.

Communication is a two-way affair. Jewish creativity throughout the generations was based upon a struggle with the textual sources of the Jewish people. Each generation, at the same time, both received and struggled with the texts, and thus was born the process of Jewish creativity. The absence of such a struggle in Israeli society leaves the average Jew lacking basic elements in their own self-identity. These elements are essential to nurturing Jewish creativity. The result is a lack of creativeness nurtured by Jewish sources, both on the personal and the public level. This need must be addressed.

**\*Ex. 14, 1 - 3**

The LORD said to Moses: <sup>2</sup>Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. <sup>3</sup>Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, "They are astray in the land; the wilderness has closed in on them."

Pharaoh has given in to the last of the plagues, and the people of Israel are leaving Egypt. They leave the borders of Egypt, and then God tells Moses to have them turn back and camp Baal Zephon facing the sea (Ex. 14, 1-2). Then we read: "Pharaoh will say of the Israelites, "They are astray in the land ["nevukhim heym ba-aretz"]; the wilderness has closed in on them. ["sagar aleihem ha-midbar"]"" (Ex. 14, 3) Pharaoh interprets their turning back and encampment as perplexity or confusion ("nevukhim"). This is presented in order to explain his motivation to chase after the Israelites and try and return them to slavery.

The Midrash on Exodus known as **Mekhilta d'R. Ishmael** strives to understand the word "nevukhim". In the process a multi voiced Midrash is created, typical of this school. Each explanation of the word is supported by an appropriate verse from the Bible. It is a fascinating process of interpretation by word play, and each layer reveals more possible meanings to what seems to be a simple statement. **TTT 97 L and H**

The first suggestion is that "nevukhim" means "bewildered". The verse from Joel 1, 18 is cited. In this verse cattle are bewildered because they have no pasture. So, the Israelites are like cattle who have no idea of where their next meal will be coming



from. In this version they begin their journey like penniless immigrants with no real concrete plan for survival. According to this version perhaps Pharaoh thinks that he can persuade Israel to return to his service, because otherwise they will have nothing to eat! He reckons that people will be willing to be slaves rather than starve to death.

The next suggestion is that the word means "confused". The proof text is from the book of Esther when Haman and the king sit down to eat and the city of Shushan is confused (3, 15). This points to a confusion about reality. The people of Shushan do not understand why a decree has been issued in the name of the king to kill all the Jews on one particular day. They don't understand what is happening, and they are confused. This is actually better than if they were to be enthusiastically supporters of the decree. Here Pharaoh sees Israel as being confused about what is happening to them. They are not taking in the reality of being free, on the one hand, but on the other hand of having to fend for themselves in this inhospitable desert. Perhaps he wishes to take advantage of their confusion to return them to slavery. It is a commonplace that when people are confused they wish more than anything for clarity. Thus, a dictator can enslave them by merely putting things in simple black and white terms. They prefer that to the ambiguity of uncertainty.

Our verse goes on to say that: "the wilderness has closed in on them. ["sagar aleihem ha-midbar"]". The sentence begins with a most curious use of language: "Pharaoh will say", "ve-amar Paroh". The curious thing is the use of the "va-amar" here. It is not usual in direct quotation. Our Midrash takes this to signify a kind of prophetic statement by Pharaoh, that is, he will speak, unwittingly, of what will happen in the future. In this opinion, Moses is lost and does not know where to lead Israel. The word "nevukhim" signifies Moses! That is, Moses is leading them around aimlessly in the desert. Here the emphasis is on the leadership. When the leader doesn't have a clear map of where to go, the nation is lead astray. The proof-text for the identity of "nevukhim" with Moses is Deut. 32, 49 where Moses is told to ascend mount Nevo to die. It seems to me that this is a play on the word "nevukhim", where the first part of the word is written as Nevo, and the last part of the word "vukhim" can be read as crying. Thus, "nevukhim" is clearly Moses who ascends mount Nevo to die and the nation cries in mourning for him.

This word play is central to the next opinion in this Midrash. Pharaoh's words of unwitting prophecy are that Israel will cry in the desert, as is written in Num. 14, 1. Finally, the last opinion closes the cycle by having Pharaoh "predict" that Israel will all die in the wilderness. This continues the story of Num. 14 which begins with crying at the report of the scouts, and ends with the announcement that the whole generation will die in the wilderness (v. 29). Here the word "nevukhim" signifies an attitude of the nation. They are not capable of living up to the dream that brought them to the desert in the first place. It is very difficult for people to be faithful to a vision particularly when they are strapped to just survive in the hostile environment of the desert. Here the word "nevukhim" means lack of loyalty to a mission. Indeed, the use of the word "ba-aretz" in this strophe of the verse hints at THE "aretz", the land of Israel. Even though the nation has left Egypt to get to the land of Israel, they are ambiguously committed to going there.

In one Midrash we have a multi-vocal account of how the word "nevukhim" illuminates the struggle for freedom. We see how freedom is under attack because of the difficulties of decision both by the leaders and by the nation.

**\*Ex. 14, 30**

*"Thus the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea."*

Parashat Be-Shallah contains the dramatic account of God's salvation of Israel, the crossing of the Reed Sea. This incident is central to the Jewish view of salvation, indeed it is the prototype of God's salvation. For this reason we read it every day in our prayer service, to remind us that God's salvation is real and that it is an ongoing fact of existence. Just as God's providing our daily bread is an ongoing part of our existence, so is his salvation (cf. **Gen. R. 20, 9**).

It is also clear from the Biblical account that Israel was not considered as "freed" from Egypt until after the Reed Sea. In what sense is their true freedom incomplete until after this event?

I wish to consider this question in the light of a most interesting textual problem. In Ex. 14 the people is frightened as they see the 600 Egyptian chariots pursuing them. In verse 13 Moses tells the nation: "Have no fear! Stand by, and witness the deliverance which the LORD will work for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again." Yet, after the crossing of the sea, and after the Egyptians are drowned in the sea, the Torah tells us: "Thus the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea." (Ex. 14, 30)

There are two problems with these verses. One is that if Moses promises Israel that they will never see the Egyptians again, how is it, and why is it, that they DO see them again, albeit dead, on the shore of the sea? The second is that in the Song of the Sea we read that the Egyptians are cast down into the depths of the sea like stones. (Ex. 15, 4-5) In that case, how is it possible for Israel to see them on the shore?

The simplest answer is given by **Ibn Ezra** in his comment on **Ex. 14, 30**. He interprets the word "delivered" to mean: "until now the fear of the king was upon them, and since Torah writes that the Egyptians drowned in the sea, and the sea did not throw them back up on dry land, therefore, "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea" means that Israel was on the shore of the sea and they saw the Egyptians die as they were drowning in the sea." So, for Ibn Ezra until one is over the fear of one's enemy freedom is not complete, and seeing one's enemy perish is enough to gain freedom from that fear. Also, he points out that the dead Egyptians were not really on the shore.

I believe that Ibn Ezra is making his statement as a polemic against the Talmudic tradition. In the Talmud we read that the phrase "the faithfulness of the Lord endures forever", from the shortest Psalm, Psalm 117, 2, was said by the fishes in the sea. This is in accord with the saying of R. Huna. R. Huna, as per Rabbah bar Mari, explained that Israel, in the generation of the Exodus, had little faith. They rebelled against God, even at the Sea of Reeds (cf. Ps. 106, 7). How did they rebel? After they had crossed the sea, they turned around and did not see the Egyptians. They did NOT believe that God had saved them from the Egyptians by drowning them!! They said: "just as we have made it through the sea and come up on this shore, the Egyptians must have made it through the sea and come up on the opposite shore."

At this flagrant lack of faith, God commands the sea to throw the bodies of the Egyptians up onto the shore where Israel is standing. But, the sea answers: "Does the master give His servant a gift, and then take it back?" God answers: "I will make it up to you by giving you one and a half times as many [chariots and enemies of Israel]." The sea answers: "Lord, how can the servant make a claim against the master?" [if you won't keep your promise] God answers: "The Kishon brook will be my guarantor". At this point, the sea spills the bodies of the Egyptians onto the shore, and Israel came and looked at them, "as it is written: "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea." (**Pesahim 118b, cf. Arachin 15a**).

Now this Midrash answers our questions in a different way. Indeed, Israel had to see the dead bodies in order to overcome their lack of faith. Freedom demands deep faith, it is not enough to "know" that one's enemies have been destroyed. The fear of the enemy cannot be dispelled without concrete physical evidence that they are no longer a threat. This Midrash implies that this aspect of freedom stayed with Israel into the future. Thus, the one and a half times the number of Egyptians is the 900 chariots of Sisera (Judges 4, 12) in the war of Barak and Deborah. The Haftarah for this week, the Song of Deborah, tells how the Kishon brook swept them away (Judges 5, 21), and Israel does NOT need to see bodies!

Many times looking at pictures of wars we see dead bodies, and we become callous. The image of "the enemy" continues to keep us in fear, so that even seeing them dead before us cannot remove that emotion from our hearts. Fear and aggressive tendencies to fight the enemy dictate our actions, long after we have seen the enemy dead and buried. In this sense we are not free, we cannot freely choose our course of actions, until we can put out of our minds and hearts OUR OWN FEAR of the enemy. Seeing them dead is not enough. **TTT 98 M**

Another Midrash sharpens this point even more. This Midrash uses the Talmudic tradition to have Israel see the Egyptian bodies on the shore, but it adds "[Israel said] here is my oppressor, here is my taskmaster, for they recognized them each one of them, as it says: "Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea."" (**Pirkei d'R. Eliezer, 41; cf. Mekhilta d'R. Ishmael, beshallah, va-yehi beshallah, 6**). This tradition has Israel not only seeing bodies, but recognizing them, and getting over the fear of being a slave to this particular person. Israel is finally free of seeing an enemy in every foreign face, by virtue of the fact that they can confront their enemies directly KNOWING THAT THEY ARE NO LONGER SLAVES, knowing that these people no longer can control their lives. It is THAT knowledge which leads them to true freedom. Looking at one's oppressor in the face, whether another person or some trait within ourselves, and believing that God can help and that God will help us to 'walk away from it', that is the secret of true freedom.

**\*Ex. 14:31**

*"The nation then was in awe of the Lord, and believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant"*

This week we read the whole sequence of Keriyat Yam Suf. We begin with the dramatic story of the chase by the Egyptians, Israel's dilemma caught between an army and entering the sea, and the final triumph after entering the sea. This culminates in the Song of the Sea, Shirat ha-Yam, which praises God for delivering

Israel from Egypt, splitting the sea, and destroying the Egyptians. After these stirring events the Torah records: "The nation than was in awe of the Lord, and believed in the Lord and in Moses His servant" (Ex. 14:31).

These events are recalled daily in our prayers, more than once. The main reference to them is in the "birkat geullah" after reading Shema. Apparently there is an attempt to recreate the awe and belief referred to in the Torah on a daily basis. The fact of past deliverance should inform our faith in a future one.

There are those of us who feel that parts of the birkat geullah are problematic in modern Israel. Particularly problematic are those parts which stress and restress the revenge taken out on the Egyptians. The question of whether it is proper to gloat over your enemies downfall, is one which is dealt with in Jewish tradition, "Do not rejoice at your enemies downfall" (Proverbs 24:17). And yet, this prayer does just that!

The Midrash (Ex. **Rabbah 22:3, Vilna**) brings a halachic tradition:

"one who reads "Shema" must mention the splitting of the Red Sea and the killing of the firstborn in "emet ve-yatziv", and if it is not mentioned they are not to go back [return and redo the prayer], but if they do not mention the exodus from Egypt, they are to return [and recite the prayer with that in it]." /This halakha apparently reflects an early Erez Israel tradition, in which the killing of the first born is not mentioned in birkat geullah, as is found in some genizah fragments. The splitting of the sea, however, is found in all known versions, and thus it appears before the killing of the first born in this source. (see commentary of E. A. HaLevi on Midrash Rabbah). **TTT 99 T and M and HA**

The historical focal points of "geullah" are: 1) the Exodus 2) the splitting of the Red Sea and 3) the killing of the first born. According to this source only the first is obligatory to be mentioned, for if it is left out, the prayer has to be repeated in order to include it. The last two, if left out, do not constitute an "invalid prayer", and no repetition is necessary. The Midrash explains why mentioning the Exodus is obligatory and the splitting of the sea is not, by saying that God's name is associated with the Exodus at the beginning of the Ten Commandments (cf. Ex. 20:2), but the splitting of the sea is not associated there with God's name.

Geullah or redemption is associated with God's power to save. We are grateful for our own redemption and praise God for that. But, there are sources which justify Israel's joy at the killing of the Egyptians at the Red Sea. The angels are not allowed to express joy even at the downfall of the wicked, but those who are saved from them are allowed. (cf. **TB Megillah 10b, Sanh. 39b**) Still, our midrash seems to point to this "heter" as not essential to expressing geullah. What is essential is a sense of gratitude and awe at being redeemed, at leaving the enslaving situation for the potential for freedom. Thus, if the splitting of the Red Sea is not mentioned, you do not return and introduce it. This attitude seems to be even clearer as regards the killing of the first-born.

The midrash ends with the idea that as a result of experiencing God's redemption at the sea, Israel was able to sing the song of the sea. Belief is connected to personal

experience, the experience of being saved from disaster. In this case that salvation was connected to the deaths of the Egyptians. Perhaps, the midrash is implying that the total experience in the eyes of Israel, being saved and seeing enemies drowned, is what produced belief. Thus, the song which resulted in praise for God includes all of those elements.

Our present day birkat ha-geullah has all three of these elements in it. Perhaps, it is time to rethink moderation in the language of joy over our enemies downfall. Both in the light of this halachic tradition which does not view the revenge part of the beracha as essential, and in the light of the renewed power of Israel. In a situation where we have military power, and can easily destroy lives, it is important to moderate "language of revenge".

**\*Ex. 15:2**

*"The LORD is my strength and might"*

*Ozi ve-zimrat yah: "The LORD is my strength and might" (Ex. 15:2).*

This is the opening of the Song of the Sea. The Hebrew is an exceedingly difficult phrase. It is almost unintelligible. The English translation takes the Hebrew word "yah", "the Lord", to be the subject of the phrase. "My strength" renders the Hebrew word "ozi". The word "ve-zimrat" is rendered in this JPS translation as "might", although the footnote says that some render it as "song". The phrase is taken as praise of the Lord who is a protector of the one saying the song.

Indeed, many commentaries go to great lengths to interpret the phrase in that fashion. Perhaps the clearest example is **Sforno**, who says that God's might ("oz") and praise ("zimrah") are made manifest by the hurling of horse and rider into the sea. Sforno writes: "by this God showed his might that He is King of all Kings, and that it is worthy that those saved praise God by loud song, overjoyed at being the servants of the Master of the Universe." Sforno represents a strong tradition that the Song of the Sea is an expression of gratitude to God, and of willing submission, in song, to the Master who can turn the sea upside down. It is Israel's song, and their song alone, praising God's power.

However, there is another tradition. This tradition might render the verse in English as follows: "You are my strength, and the Lord sings to us". This tradition takes the phrase "ve-zimrat yah" to mean, "the song of God", that is, God is the one who is singing! Israel praises God, and God reciprocates by praising Israel. This tradition sees the relationship between God and Israel as a mutual one, one of partnership, rather than one of subservience alone. **TTT 100 K and T and B**

The Midrash spells out this theme by pointing out several instances of mutual language reciprocating between God and Israel. "You have affirmed Israel as Your people, and they have affirmed You as their God (cf. Deut. 26:18) ... Israel recites "Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord alone" (Deut. 6:4), and the Holy Spirit cries out from Heaven and says: "Who is like you Israel, One nation in the world" (2 Sam. 23:7); Israel says "who is like You among the celestials" (Ex. 15:11), and the Holy Spirit cries out from Heaven and says: "O happy Israel, who is like you" (Deut. 33:29)" (**Mekhilta de-R. Yishmael, masekhta de-shirah, 3**) For each characterization

of God that is sung in praise by Israel, this Midrash shows that the same characterization is sung in praise of Israel by God!

This theme of reciprocity and mutuality is found as one of the major themes of Rabbinic thought. It is applied to concrete examples, such as the tephillin. Indeed, the Meshekh Hokhmah understands that our verse alludes to the tephillin; since we know from the Talmud that God wears tephillin, just as Israel wears them (cf. **Berachot 6a ff.**). Meshekh Hokhmah makes the incident of the crossing of the sea the locus of when Israel becomes worthy to learn of putting on tephillin. It is the deep faith in a God who is present, and who shows concern by salvation that leads to the creation of this mitzvah.

**Meshekh Hokhmah**, however, includes in his commentary (on **Ex. 15:2**) a warning from the Rambam. He points out that Rambam warned against believing in signs as a character flaw, because it is easily reversed if another person brings another sign in place of the one given (**Yad, yesodei ha-Torah 8:1**). Rather, one must believe out of a sense of God's presence, one must try and sense that presence directly, and not think that any physical sign or symbol is in place of God. The tephillin, in his view, are an example of God's presence, and of the mutuality of God and Israel. Since when one puts on tephillin, one should think that God is putting them on at the same time. (cf. his development of the theme of tephillin and marriage there.) The tephillin are in a sense a ceremony of mutual betrothal, and as such they are a perfect symbol of this view of the Song of the Sea. **TTT 100 K and T and B**

**\*Ex. 16, 4**

*And the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion..."*

At the end of this week's parasha, Israel complains that they have nothing to eat. After the miracle of the Exodus, reality sets in, and the people wonder if they will be able to exist only on the heady joy of freedom. One must have food, after all. God's response is astonishing: "And the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread for you from the sky, and the people shall go out and gather each day that day's portion..." (Ex. 16, 4) Thus, begins one of the most fascinating episodes of the wilderness period. The manna, bread, from heaven begins to appear.

The collection of the manna is connected to the Shabbat, but what intrigues me this week is the phenomenon of the manna itself. Each person collects a days worth of food for themselves. It is not eaten raw, but must be prepared, as we learn from verse 23: "Bake what you would bake and boil what you would boil...". However we view the manna, one thing is clear in the narrative, namely, that every morning food aplenty for every single person was available. It merely had to be gathered and prepared. On Friday, a double portion was collected, for the manna was not available on Shabbat.

Now all of this is intriguing enough by itself, but what is most curious about all of this is the end of the story: "Moses said, "This is what the LORD has commanded: Let one *Omer* of it be kept throughout the ages, in order that they may see the bread that I fed you in the wilderness when I brought you out from the land of Egypt." And Moses said to Aaron, "Take a jar, put one *Omer* of manna in it, and place it before the LORD,

to be kept throughout the ages." ... And the Israelites ate manna forty years, until they came to a settled land; they ate the manna until they came to the border of the land of Canaan." (Ex. 16: 32-33,35).

Why must the future generations "see the bread"? We recount the 10 plagues, we sing the song of the splitting of the sea, why is just telling about it not enough for the manna? Radak points out that we tend to concentrate on the suffering and punishment associated with Egypt. It is harder for us to really identify with the salvation, with God's saving actions. Thus, we need to "see" a physical reminder to bring us to closer identification with leaving exile (**Radak on Isa. 41:20**) That is, we viscerally identify with our past suffering, and think less of our joy and daily bread as manifestations of God's love.

Not only that, but the wonder of the manna was greater than any other of the wonders God did for Israel. This is because this wonder occurred \*every day for 40 years\*, while the others were one-time affairs! (cf. **Ibn Ezra, short commentary, Ex. 16:5**) But, it is precisely this most miraculous of qualities which ironically causes us to become immune to the miracle. It is the very recurrence which prompts us to take for granted what is a miracle. **TTT 101 T and B**

In our case, the manna symbolizes the freedom from bondage. Both in its sustaining role and because it is necessary for us to work on it in order to make it edible. Having to collect the manna and cook it every day, having to do all we can to keep our freedom from deteriorating on a daily basis, makes us take it for granted, and even makes it seem tiresome. We forget that it is miraculous and a gift from God altogether!

This psychological ennui that sets in towards the basic gifts that God gives to us explains the question posed by the Midrash. Why was there no song sung in praise of the manna? (**Ex. R. 25,7**) There was a song at the sea, there is a song for the well of Miriam, why is there no song for the manna. Indeed, this Midrash points out, the manna gains scorn rather than praise (cf. Num. 11:6 "Now our gullets are shriveled. There is nothing at all! Nothing but this manna to look to!") The people just didn't like it. It is too hard to keep up. We lose our sense of gratitude to God for the basic gifts whether it is bread or freedom.

People tend to remember to cry out to God when they are tired of the manna, but not to praise God when they have it every day. The late Prof. Rosen-Tzvi, z"l, wrote about his discovering that he had cancer:

"When the disease was discovered I felt no need to cry out in complaint to God "why me?" That is a question that is not found in my world of religious concepts. The combination of consciousness that the world operates by its natural order together with belief in an absolute supreme power, does not allow such a question to be part of my theology. When God favored me with a wonderful family, united and powerful, with a wife and children that continue Jewish tradition, when God stood by me in times of professional success, I did not ask "why me?" I did not doubt then the Creator's intelligence. In times of distress and difficulty shall I overturn my own beliefs?" (in, **Multiculturalism in a Democratic and Jewish State, in memory of Rosen-Tzvi, 1998, pp. 15-16**)

For Ariel Rosen-Tzvi, his belief alone was enough to stand fast in his trust of God's world. For many other people, God's bounties are taken for granted, and even minor discomfort is cause for changing basic beliefs. Thus, the jar of manna is meant to be what must be preserved, a tangible piece of evidence that is meant to warn us about being ungrateful. It is a warning to value our freedom as one of God's greatest gifts. It is a constant reminder to be aware of God's blessings, both the materiel and the spiritual, and not neglect to cultivate awareness of them, which leads to increasing the blessing for all.

**\*Ex. 15, 6**

*Your right hand, O LORD, glorious in power, Your right hand, O LORD, shatters the foe!*

**\*Ex. 17:5-6**

*<sup>5</sup>Then the LORD said to Moses, "Pass before the people; take with you some of the elders of Israel, and take along the rod with which you struck the Nile, and set out. <sup>6</sup>I will be standing there before you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock and water will issue from it, and the people will drink." And Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel*

**\*Ex. 17, 11-13**

*Then, whenever Moses held up his hand ("ka-asher yarim Moshe yado"), Israel prevailed ("ve-gavar Yisrael"); but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed ("va-yahalosh") the people of Amalek with the sword.*

Parashat Be-Shallah begins with the crossing of the Red Sea and ends with Israel fighting a war against Amalek. Joshua is commanded to choose men to fight against Amalek in battle. At the sea God fights for Israel, and although God tells Moses to stretch out his hand over the sea (EX. 14, 21 and 26), in the song celebrating this victory it is God's hand which is praised. (Ex. 15, 6). But, this elation is short lived. The people find water, but it is bitter. So another miracle is performed. Soon after the people find themselves thirsty, and this time no water at all. They cry out to Moses to give them water. Moses, as we have seen in the past, is upset with God. He cries out to God again and complains, "what can I do for them", where am I to produce water in the Sinai desert?

God calmly tells Moses to take "your staff with which you smote the Nile" and go to a rockface. Moses is then to strike the rockface with his staff, and water will pour forth, enough for the nation to drink (Ex. 17:5-6). Apparently, the nation has become addicted to miracles. After the 10 plagues, the miraculous leaving of Egypt with riches, and then the drowning of the Egyptians at the Reed Sea, belief is conditioned upon miracles from God. Just as sometimes a patient is given morphine to help ease pain, but they become addicted to it, so God has personally performed miracles for Israel in order to help them and relieve their pain, but their belief has become dependent on the miracles. So, God produces another miracle with Moses' staff, just as the very first miracle, the smiting of the Nile and turning it to blood, was done with Moses' staff.

However, Ramban (and others) notice that Moses did not actually smite the Nile, but rather he just gave an order to do so. Moses tells Aaron to take his staff and smite the Nile (Ex. 3:17-19). Apparently the command is what is important and not the staff. The miracle is not brought about by the staff, but by God's word through Moses.



Still, the concrete symbol of the miracle is the staff. The people seem to be dependent on that too. Indeed, Ramban asks, why does God denote the staff by the phrase "with which you smote the Nile"? Why did God not say, "the staff which turned into a snake", or "the staff which wrought signs and wonders"? He answers that this particular appellation is used because this is the staff which took good water and turned it into undrinkable blood, changing its nature. Now, the staff will take rock, and turn it into drinkable water. This will show God's power, that he can reverse any process.

How many staffs did Moses and Aaron have? Were there specific staffs for specific tasks? In other words, is every miracle the same, by virtue of its being a miracle? I think that Ramban's answer is no. Rather, we are meant to pay attention to the details, and see that there are different qualities to each miracle in life.

In any case, God and Moses sense that they have to wean the people from their dependency on miracles. Immediately after this episode, Amalek attacks Israel. The reader is expecting another miracle. Perhaps Moses will take his staff, and stretch it out and Amalek will be swallowed up in the ground? No, Moses turns to Joshua and tells him that he must choose soldiers to fight Amalek. What a dramatic change from all that has come before!! Moses does take his staff to the hill, but it is only a symbol. It is at best a symbol of faith, not the essence of it. **TTT 102 T and B**

The Mishnah in **RH 3:8** which rhetorically asks "do Moses' hands make war?", accurately explicates the flow of the text. The Mishnah sees Moses' action as saying to Israel, up till now you believed that the staff and the hands of Moses performed the miracles, but you were wrong. The power which is miraculous is the spirit of God, and the loyalty of people to God. People can translate that loyalty to God into actions. When we keep our mind and heart on God's spirit and on God's word, Torah, we can do great things.

In the end it is Moses' hands which aid Israel's soldiers to win the battle. "Then, whenever Moses held up his hand ("ka-asher yarim Moshe yado"), Israel prevailed ("ve-gavar Yisrael"); but whenever he let down his hand, Amalek prevailed. But Moses' hands grew heavy; so they took a stone and put it under him and he sat on it, while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, supported his hands; thus his hands remained steady until the sun set. And Joshua overwhelmed ("va-yahalosh") the people of Amalek with the sword." (Ex. 17, 11-13)

The two verbs used in this description of the battle with Amalek are "gavar", prevail, and "halash", overwhelm or to weaken. Both of these verbs connote "winning", and they are used to describe how Israel was victorious. The use of "gavar" describes victory from the point of view of the soldier in battle who feels his domination over the enemy. It is the same root as the word "man", "gever", and alludes to what today might be called "military machismo". The word "halash" describes victory from the point of view of the defeated enemy who is weakened, and vanquished.

One Midrash notes that these same words appear in the context of the incident of the golden calf (Ex. 32). This Midrash explicates the verse in Kohelet: "I have further observed under the sun that the race is not won by the swift, nor the battle by the valiant; Nor is bread won by the wise, Nor wealth by the intelligent, Nor favor by the

learned. For the time of mischance comes to all." (9, 11) The Midrash interprets each phrase in terms of biblical personalities and stories (**Gen. R. 96 Theodore-Albeck**).

The phrase, "Nor favor by the learned" is interpreted as applying to Joshua. Joshua is the first military leader of the nation of Israel. He is also wise and learned, but according to this Midrash there are times when his learning and wisdom did not bring him favor. R. Ahva the son of R. Zeira expounds that twice Joshua expressed his judgment of the situation to his teacher Moses, and both times Moses rejected Joshua's interpretation. One was at the incident of Eldad and Medad who prophesied without approval. Joshua wishes to jail them, but Moses rejects this assessment, and says, "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets". (Num. 11, 26-30)

The second time was at the incident of the golden calf. When Moses and Joshua approach the camp and hear the Israelites celebrating the golden calf, Joshua says that he hears the "the voice of war in the camp" (Ex. 32, 17). Our Midrash has Moses reply to this: "Joshua, a person who is destined to rule 600,000 men cannot distinguish between one voice and another voice?!" Moses explains to Joshua that it is "not the voice of war", "kol anot gevurah", using our verse where "gavar" is the sound of soldiers cheering in victory; and it is not the sound of defeat, "kol anot halusha", using our verse where "halash" is the sound of defeat. Rather, says Moses, it is, "kal anot", the voice of social disintegration, internal conflict, not war between two nations.

This Midrash is striking in its description of the voices of combat that seem to occur consistently in human society. There are the voices of those who trumpet war and glorify soldiering. There are the voices of those overwhelmed in war, casualties of the pain and terror of war. There are voices of internal social disintegration that have nothing to do with war against external enemies. The leader who is to rule the lives of so many must be able to discern these different voices, because they all are dangerous, and they all need to be addressed in different ways.

This Midrash is reminding us that the voice of victory has, by its side, the voice of pain. One must be attuned to both voices. While the voice of social wholeness may be gained during time of war, through Moses' hands upon which Israel focused its' attention, but in times of stress that voice might be compromised. (cf. Mishna Rosh HaShana 3, 8) This Midrash is concerned about leaders that do not know how to distinguish these voices. Perhaps, this Midrash is warning us that all three of these "voices" must be taken into account, for if any one of them is overlooked the nation is not free of danger. **TTT 102 T and B and P**

**\*Ex. 18, 1-7**

*Jethro priest of Midian, Moses' father-in-law, heard all that God had done for Moses and for Israel His people, how the LORD had brought Israel out from Egypt. <sup>2</sup>So Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, took Zipporah, Moses' wife, after she had been sent home, <sup>3</sup>and her two sons – of whom one was named Gershom, that is to say, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land"; <sup>4</sup>and the other was named Eliezer, meaning, "The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." <sup>5</sup>Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, brought Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God. <sup>6</sup>He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." <sup>7</sup>Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent.*

Parashat Yitro, is named after Moses' father-in-law, who was not an Israelite. The Torah does not seem to be bothered by the fact that Yitro is not Jewish, indeed, he is shown great honor. Yitro hears all that God has done for Moses and Israel (Ex. 18, 1). He takes Zipporah, Gershom and Eliezer and brings "... Moses' sons and wife to him in the wilderness, where he was encamped at the mountain of God." (ibid. 5) Then, the Torah says: "He sent word to Moses, "I, your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." Moses went out to meet his father-in-law; he bowed low and kissed him; each asked after the other's welfare, and they went into the tent." (ibid. 6-7)

What do we know about Yitro? Why is he given such honor? One answer could be that Moses accepts his advice on how to set up a judicial administrative system. This is a greater innovation than one might think at first glance. After all, the system of having different size units to spare one person from all tasks is not such a difficult concept to arrive at! Surely, Moses must have been able to think of that himself. So the question is: why did Moses not implement such a system on his own cognizance, or what was it about Yitro's presentation that convinced Moses that he should do it?

Yitro helps Moses to see the fallacies in his failing to enact a tiered system of justice. "You can't do it alone", he tells him, but Moses apparently thought that he HAD to do it alone. He, Moses, is God's representative, how could anyone else share that role? But, this is just what Yitro makes him see. Moses is told to "seek out from among all the people capable men who fear God, trustworthy men who spurn ill-gotten gain." (ibid. 21) Such people can share the burden of being God's representatives in judgment. The qualities of honesty, integrity and awe of God make for a reliable partner in dispensing justice, even if those people have not experienced prophetic revelation directly from God.

Not only that, but Moses thinks that he is doing well for the nation. Yitro tells him that the nation will be worn out by Moses being the sole judge. There can never be a single voice in judgment, even if that voice has the direct backing of God! (ibid. 18, 23) Yitro teaches Moses another lesson in being partners with God. **TTT 103 P and K and T and B**

The Midrash works hard to make these insights of Yitro connected to Yitro's coming close to Torah, leaving his idolatrous ways to become attached to the One God.

Indeed, the Midrash reads the Torah as expressing astonishment at Yitro's religious transformation. For example, the fact that he leaves his most comfortable and wealthy home to go to the desert is one such sign. Another sign is that he sacrifices to God, leaving behind his other gods. (v. 12, cf. **Mekhilta d'R. Ishmael, masekhta d'Amalek, Yitro 1**)

A further sign of Yitro's religious experience of God is connected with the famous Midrashic comment that what aroused Yitro to come and visit Moses was that he "heard" that God had given the Torah to Israel (cf. **Mekhilta, there, and Zevachim 116a**). A great debate is sparked in the later commentators over this remark, for that means that the story is not in its proper sequence in the Torah. This debate is worthy of its own explication, but, for our purposes what is important is that this Midrashic tradition assumes that Yitro is affected by the revelation of Torah. He has his own "side-stream" revelation as a result of "hearing" about it. And when he appears and Moses "tells him about all that God has done for Israel" (v. 8), this tradition can say that Moses teaches him Torah, "in order to attract him and draw him close to Torah". (**Mekhilta, ibid.**) Of course, this tradition solves the question of what Moses is doing judging people if the laws of the Torah have not yet been given. The answer is, they have been given, and this story is out of sequence.

The main point of this Midrashic tradition is that Yitro is thus the FIRST person to learn Torah solely from Moshe Rabbeinu, in his role as Rabbi! That is he is the first to learn Torah NOT directly from God, through revelation at Sinai, but solely by "hearing" it, being part of the tradition of Oral Torah! Perhaps it is his OWN experience of accessibility and empowerment as a student of Torah that leads him to understand that people with the right qualities can be active partners with Moses and God in application of the Torah to life! **TTT 103 P and K and T and B**

I believe it is this understanding of Yitro that motivates the Midrash to interpret the verse: "I [ani], your father-in-law Jethro, am coming to you, with your wife and her two sons." (v. 6) in an astonishing way. The Midrash is bothered by the word "I" [ani]. Of course it is him, Moses has no other father-in-law named Yitro. R. Eliezer interprets the 'ani' to be God speaking, as God usually does in the first person. He read the verse in this manner: "I [God] [tell you], your father-in-law Jethro, is coming...", I am He who created the world, I am He who brings close and does not distance, as it says: "I am a God who brings near, and not a God who distances" (Jer. 23, 23, as per the Midrash reading of the verse). I am he who enabled Yitro to draw near and did not prevent him from so doing, so should you, when a person comes to you to take on Judaism (to convert), and he comes out of love of Heaven, so you must bring him close and never drive him away..." (**Mekhilta, ibid.**)

This Midrash stresses that the first person to accept God, and come to learn Torah was Yitro, here viewed as a convert! God's Torah, by this view, is for all who wish to come close to God, and the case of Yitro proves it. It also proves our duty to bring closer those who seek, and never to distance them from Torah. Perhaps because of this, the Midrash there continues that Moses was the one serving Yitro and the elders. Just as Abraham served the three angels, even though he thought they were Arabian idolators, for he wanted to make Torah beautiful and attractive for them. So, we are obliged to serve those who wish to accept Torah, and draw them close. **TTT 103 P and K and T and B and HA**

Yitro takes his daughter and Moses' two sons who have been staying with him to reunite with Moses at Mt. Sinai. The Torah spells out who these sons are: "And her two sons - of whom one ["shem ha-ehad"] was named Gershom, that is to say, "I have been a stranger in a foreign land"; and the other ["ve-shem ha-ehad"] was named Eliezer, meaning, "The God of my father was my help, and He delivered me from the sword of Pharaoh." (Ex. 18, 3-4)

Now, there is a problem concerning the second son, Eliezer. We know about Gershom who was born after Moses married Tzipporah (Ex. 2, 21-22). We are even told in those verses the etiology of his name which is the same as we read here in chapter 18. It seems quite reasonable that Moses having fled Egypt feels that he is in a foreign land and a stranger in Midian, so he names his son after that experience. It is a bit like an Israeli Jew in say, Teaneck New Jersey, would name his son "Galusthere". It certainly points out the irony of the situation, but perhaps Moses only now can begin to feel the strangeness that Israelites feel in Egypt. He grew up as an Egyptian and perhaps did not feel like a foreigner there, but the Torah describes Israel in general as strangers in Egypt.

But, the real problem is where does Eliezer come from? There is no mention of his birth! Ok, you will say what about Ex. 4, 20 when Moses first starts out to go back to Egypt and he takes his family: "So Moses took his wife and sons". He took sons, plural, so there must have been more than one. That is true, but how do we know this is Eliezer? There is no name given except that of Gershom. And, come to think of it, the name Eliezer should have been given to the first son, since his most immediate experience was escaping Pharaoh's sword! Furthermore, the way the names are stated in our verse is surprising! Both are called "ha-ehad"! We would expect that for Eliezer the Torah would say something like "ve-shem ha-aher", the name of the other one, but it says, in Hebrew, exactly the same as it says for Gershom!

One Midrash understands that each son is "ehad", a favored "one". Eliezer is the "one" of Tzipporah, and Gershom is the "one" of Moses. (**Sekhel Tov, on Ex. 18, 4**) Gershom is clearly Moses favorite for he names him directly. But, how is Eliezer Tzipporah's favorite, when and why? This Midrash also asks when was Eliezer named Eliezer? It quotes an earlier Midrash which bespeaks of a Midrashic tradition about Eliezer's name? R. Yehoshua asks what event is referred to. His answer is: "When Datan said to Moses "who made you chief and ruler over us" then "When Pharaoh learned of the matter, he sought to kill Moses" (Ex. 2, 14-15). They caught Moses, bound him, and raised him on a platform and placed a sword at his neck. At that moment an angel appeared in the form of Moses, and they let Moses go and ran after the angel." (**Mekhilta d'R Ishmael Yitro masekhta d'Amalek**).

Rabbi Eliezer has another version:

"An angel afflicted those who had captured Moses, some of them became dumb, some became deaf, and some became blind. They asked the dumb ones 'where is Moses' but they could not answer, the deaf ones could not hear, and the blind ones could not see where he was." (ibid. also cf. **Mekhilta d'Rashbi 18, 4**)

Both of these Midrashim assume that the incident referred to in the etiology of Eliezer's name is Moses escape from Pharaoh's desire to kill him after the slaying of the Egyptian taskmaster became known.

**\*Ex. 19, 8 - 9**

*<sup>8</sup>All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the LORD. <sup>9</sup>And the LORD said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." Then Moses reported the people's words to the LORD,*

Talking about God means talking in metaphorical language. There are an infinite number of metaphors used to describe God and to describe the experience of God's presence. This does not mean that there is no reality behind the talk, merely that these matters are matters about which one is mistaken if one talks about them in direct language. There is no question that taking the metaphor literally is one of the most classic definitions of idolatry. **TTT 104 T**

So, I am always intrigued by images to describe God's presence in the Bible. One of them is as a cloud. In this week's parasha, which deals with God's presence, it is put thus: "And the LORD said to Moses, "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after." ..." (Ex. 19:8).

The image of the cloud, from which one hears clear speech is fascinating. The metaphor of God speaking is used constantly in the Bible, and thus, of course, the metaphor of God's mouth is common. But, here the speech is not specified as coming from a "mouth", but it is somehow heard from the midst of a thick cloud. This metaphor leads us to a vision of cloudiness and clarity at the same time, cloudiness of form and clarity of speech.

One Midrash connects this with the verse from Song of Songs: "Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth" (Song 1:2) According to this Midrash, when Moses brings God's words to the people, they say to Moses: "we want to hear this from His mouth". The people do NOT want an intermediary; they feel that the experience of God's speech should be theirs as well. The Midrash goes on to say that from the answer we learn that God agreed with the people, and thus they hear the clear speech from the midst of the thick cloud. (**Midrash Zuta, Song of Songs (Buber), 1,2**)

**Ramban** in his commentary on our verse spells out this approach in very clear terms. "What is right, in my view, is that when God says "I will come to you in a thick cloud", it means that Moses will approach the fog, in order that people can hear My words, and will themselves experience what a prophet hearing my words experiences. They will not have to believe only because of what they hear from others." Ramban validates the peoples desire to have the prophetic experience, to hear the voice of God, just as Moses does. The image of cloudiness and clarity is that while not being able to see God or make out any form, still one has a clear idea of what God wants, a clear idea of what God must be "saying".

This notion is amplified in another Midrash. This Midrash notes that the cloud which signifies God's presence at Sinai is the SAME CLOUD which descends upon the Tabernacle, as is written: "On the day that the Tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the Tabernacle" (Num. 9:15). What is the significance of this? The Midrash brings a parable of a king who had a beloved friend. The king sent a message to his beloved friend and told him that he was coming to visit him on a certain day. The

friend did not believe the king. He said to himself, "even if the king does come to visit me he will probably come dressed as a commoner or come at night".

The king learned of his friends thoughts. He sent him another message saying that not only is he coming in the daytime, but that he will ride the horse he rode at his coronation, and will wear the robes of kingship he wore then, so that "everyone will know of my affection for you". So, God appeared at Sinai as a cloud, and the people accepted His kingship. When they made the Tabernacle they wondered "But, will God really dwell on earth?" (I Ki. 8:27). God replied, "I will come to you in public, accoutered in the same way as at Sinai". (**Otzar ha-Midrashim, 222**)

Not only is the experience of God available to everyone, and not only to prophets, but it is available at all times, and NOT only at special times of national theophany. The experience of Sinai is not confined to Sinai, but in the Tabernacle, in the Synagogue, God's presence is there. No can say, I am not Moses, so I can't experience God. No one can say, I was not at Sinai, and so God's word is beyond me. We have no excuse for not hearing, except our own imperviousness to listening. I prefer to think, like the Midrash, that the same cloud is always around, the challenge to each one of us is to discern the clarity of the voice breaking forth from the cloud. **TTT 104 T**

\*Ex. 20, 1 – 14

*God spoke all these words, saying:*

*<sup>2</sup>I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage:*

*<sup>3</sup>You shall have no other gods besides Me.*

*<sup>4</sup>You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in the heavens above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth. <sup>5</sup>You shall not bow down to them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, <sup>6</sup>but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.*

*<sup>7</sup>You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one who swears falsely by His name.*

*<sup>8</sup>Remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. <sup>9</sup>Six days you shall labor and do all your work,*

*<sup>10</sup>but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work – you, your son or daughter, your male or female slave, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements. <sup>11</sup>For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it.*

*<sup>12</sup>Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the LORD your God is assigning to you.*

*<sup>13</sup>You shall not murder.*

*You shall not commit adultery.*

*You shall not steal.*

*You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.*

*<sup>14</sup>You shall not covet your neighbor's house: you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.*

The modern debate concerning the distinction between ritual and ethics is based on both defining "ritual" narrowly, namely -- serving and propitiating the gods, and on assuming that religion is a private affair of the individual. Ethics, by its very nature, is about relationships between men. In the modern democratic west only such

relationships are under the purview of the state, some kind of "social contract". Religion is separate from the state, i.e. a kind of voluntary idiosyncrasy which is tolerated by the state as long as its practice does not interfere with the affairs of other citizens. By this understanding, religion is properly reduced once again to ritualistic concerns only.

We will search the Torah in vain for even a hint at such a distinction among commandments. Nowhere in the Torah is it written that the commandments given by God, either directly or through Moses are to be divided into such categories mentioned above. In fact, one of the "revolutionary" aspects of the Torah's worldview is that there is no intrinsic distinction between Ethical and Ritual commandments.

In later rabbinic literature we can also find many expressions of the oneness of the Law. One outstanding example is the Midrash on the 10 commandments, in Mekhilta de-Rabbi Ishmael; Lauterbach II, p. 262-264, which fails to distinguish between the so called ritual and so-called ethical commands.

"How were the Ten Commandments arranged? Five on the one tablet and five on the other. On the one tablet was written: "I am the Lord thy God." And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "Thou shalt not murder." This tells that if one sheds blood it is accounted to him as though he diminished the divine image....On the one tablet was written: "Thou shalt have no other god." And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "Thou shalt not commit adultery." This tells that if one worships idols it is accounted to him as though he committed adultery, breaking his covenant with God....On the one tablet was written: "Thou shalt not take [the Lord's name in vain]." And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "Thou shalt not steal." This tells that he who steals will in the end also swear falsely....On the one tablet was written: "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "Thou shalt not bear false witness." This tells that if one profanes the Sabbath it is as though he testified in the presence of Him by whose word the world came into being that He did not create the world in six days and did not rest on the seventh day...On the one tablet was written: "Honor thy father," etc. And opposite it on the other tablet was written: "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's wife." This tells that he who covets will in the end beget a son who may curse his real father while giving filial honor to one who is not his father....These are the words of R. Hananiah, the son of Gamliel."

The message of the Midrash is that all of the 10 commandments are related and depend on one another, in that in order to understand the meaning and proper application of each, reference must be made to all the others. The midrash is based on the idea that the 10 commandments are written out on two tablets, 5 commandments on each tablet. However, they are read *h o r i z o n t a l l y* and not *v e r t i c a l l y* in a kind of zig zag! The reading *b e g i n s* with murder and "I am the Lord..." is the rationale for prohibiting murder! Murder is not prohibited because of any social reason. Indeed, given circumstances and ability most people might easily indulge in murder. The only way one can assume an absolute prohibition of murder is by appealing to a belief in a Creator of every individual life, and that to take a human life is to diminish that Creator's Being.



What is wrong with adultery is that it is tantamount to idolatry. So we understand that the sin in adultery is not illicit sex, but infidelity, the breaking of the covenant, as in idolatry. These examples show how the midrash uses the categories "between Man and God" and "between man and man" to illuminate each other, and to make the case that these categories are completely integrated.

There is no distinction between ritual and ethics in classical Judaism, for all is from one source. In the Bible and in rabbinic sources "ritual" is used to refer to all concrete prescriptions of deeds which man does in order to serve God. Thus, as man is told how to behave ethically, ethical behavior is also "ritualistic" behavior, in the sense of acting in accord with God's law.

Out of all the 10 commandments the most problematic of the ten to explain is the last, "you shall not covet" ("lo tahmod"). It is a very basic human trait to covet what others have. What is being forbidden? Can a person control thoughts? What is wrong with desiring something which belongs, in a legal or contractual way to another person?

In the Midrash we find two opposite ways to understand "lo tahmod". **Midrash Tannaim (on Deut. 5:18)**, relates the "lo tahmod" of the 10 commandments to another use of the same phrase in Deut. 7:25: "burn their idols, do not covet the silver and gold of which they are made and take it for yourself....". Israel is commanded to burn idols, but if the idols are of silver or gold, the metal will be reduced from the form of an idol to plain precious metal. This verse warns that one should not think that since the metal has been changed from its original intent, it is now proper to "take it for yourself". The Midrash reveals a process which is common in our daily lives. Compromise is made with basic principle, usually as regards to things that seem to be worth a lot of money. Silver and gold are not neutral, and they themselves, even without an idolatrous form, carry the aura of "false gods".

But, this Midrash goes on to explain that the Torah also warns us against strong desire ("ta'avah") in a separate mitzvah (Deut. 5:21). "Ta'avah" is in the heart and mind, as opposed to coveting which implies taking action. Transgressing "lo tahmod" means taking action on a strong desire, and not merely coveting something in your heart. The reason for interpreting "tahmod" as implying action is that in the verse of Deut. 7:25, "tahmod" is linked with "taking for yourself".

According to this Midrash, one does not transgress the mitzvah of "lo tahmod" until one actually takes action. **TTT 104 T and HA** Normal human nature of coveting is not what is being forbidden, but rather a combination of strong desire which leads to actually taking action to fulfill that desire. "Lo tahmod" applies even if the action changes the form of the object desired, or we might say, even if the action describes the desire in alternative language. This is the well known process of justifying impure deeds by giving them pure names.

An opposite approach is found in a fascinating Midrash in **Lev. Rabbah (ed. Margoliot 24:5)**. This Midrash explains that parashat Kedoshim is recited during the Hakhel (cf. Deut. 31:10ff). The reason is that the main principles of the Torah are found in Kedoshim, and in particular the 10 commandments are included in it. That is, for every one of the 10 commandments there is a verse in Kedoshim which

expresses or concretizes each of the 10. The verse in Kedoshim which expresses "lo tahmod" is "ve-ahavta le-reakha kamokha" "You shall love your fellow as yourself" (Lev. 19:18).

This interpretation does view "lo tahmod" as a mental state, and not necessarily as taking action. It is saying that if you coveting something your fellow has prevents you from properly loving that person. The negative commandment of "lo tahmod" interferes with the positive commandment of love. In this case the "kamokha" should be read as "love your fellow as if he IS yourself", i.e., is in the same state as yourself. Perhaps it is hard to love a wealthy person or a successful person, because we covet their wealth or their talents. One can always covet what another has, in relationship to what we ourselves have. And that coveting prevents us from truly loving that person.

#### **\*Ex. 20, 17 - 18**

*<sup>17</sup>Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." <sup>18</sup>So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.*

At the giving of the Torah, the people are afraid upon experiencing God's presence, and they ask Moses to be an intermediary for them. Moses agrees, and the Torah relates: "So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud ("ha-araphel") where God was." (Ex. 20, 17)

The picture is dramatic. A thick cloud, or fog, is seen on the mountain. All around is clear, and the sound of God's words seems to be coming from the cloud. Moses leaves the people and approaches the cloud, perhaps being enveloped in the fog, so he is no longer seen.

The metaphor conveyed by this image is tantalizing. God is surrounded by a cloud, a thick fog. God can never be approached in any fashion which could be described as "sunny and clear". Approaching God is always to go into the area of cloud, into territory covered with fog. Indeed, the Bible tells us: "Then Solomon declared: "The Lord has chosen to abide in a thick cloud". (2 Chron. 6, 1) When Solomon dedicates the Temple, it is covered by this cloud. Rashi comments simply on this verse: "since the temple was filled with smoke, I know know that the Shekhinah is resting in this fog. For this is His way, as is written, "Moses approached the thick cloud ("ha-araphel") where God was." So, it seems axiomatic that God appears in smoke.

Yet, Ramban does not view this metaphor as absolute. When Moses sees the burning bush, it may have had smoke, but it was clear what it was. **Ramban** comments that Moses went through stages. What is important for him is not the cloud, but being able to approach. At the burning bush Moses is told "do not draw near" (Ex. 3, 5) Now, he is able to approach, "Moses approached the thick cloud", and in the end Moses will "ascend to God" (Ex. 19, 3), and "behold the likeness of the Lord" (Num. 12, 8). For Ramban the important point is the ability to draw near. God, even when felt to be foggy, is approachable. Despite the cloudiness, and the mystery and danger that this image projects, Moses approached. Without being approachable, one can never imagine a likeness that could be meaningful.

According to one Midrash, however, Moses did not approach this forbidding cloud willingly. It has God sending Gabriel and Michael to grab his two arms and, against his desire, bring him close to the fog. This Midrash may play on the word "nigash", approach, in its usage in war texts, where it means "meeting on the battlefield." A struggle is taking place. It is not so easy for a person to approach, and outside help may be required. (**Pirkei d'R. Eliezer 40**)

On the other hand, another Midrash has Moses not only approach God of his own free will, but as someone with rights who will demand things of God. Even though God is strong as a lion, and even though all are in awe of God's power and majesty, Moses goes directly to God and demands that God acts. When the Torah tells us: "When the Ark was to set out, Moses would say: Advance, O Lord!" (Num. 10, 35); this Midrash understands that Moses would order God around! (**Yalkut Shimoni be-haalotekha 729**) This is, according to the Midrash's understanding, in accord with the verse: "the righteous person rules God" (2 Sam. 23, 3)

Ramban, in his treatise Torat ha-Adam, helps us make some sense of these seemingly contradictory texts. Is God unapproachable or approachable? Do righteous people, righteous actions, govern God? Ramban states that three approached God. One was Moses, as we see in our verse. But, ahead of Moses inside the cloud he finds "compassion and righteousness", for it is written, "compassion and righteousness are the foundation of Your throne" (Ps. 89, 15). And, ahead of them inside the cloud the souls of righteous people, as it is written, "in His hand is the soul of all living things" (Job 12, 10). The living things referred to are the righteous, as we read, that the soul of the righteous is bound up in the bond of life (I Sam. 25, 29). **TTT 105 B and T**

Ramban seems to tell us that the cloudiness of God can be approached by deeds of compassion and righteousness, by dedicating our souls to life. (**Torat ha-Adam, gate of retribution**) God's qualities are made manifest only by our actions, and to dispel the fog is to, in a sense, rule the fog. At least, actions of compassion and righteousness dispel the fog enough so that those seeking a vision of Divinity in the world can catch a glimpse of it.

#### **\*Ex. 20, 19 - 22**

<sup>19</sup>The LORD said to Moses:

*Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: <sup>20</sup>With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. <sup>21</sup>Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. And if you make for Me an altar of stones ["ve-im mizbah avanim ta'aseh li] , do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them.*

The dramatic and inspiring giving of the Torah is over. The nation has had the most profound spiritual experience that can possibly be imagined, and the experience happened to every single person who was standing at the foot of Sinai. Where can one go from here? Here is what happens right after the revelation at Sinai: "The Lord said to Moses: Thus shall you say to the Israelites: You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. Make for Me an altar of

earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. And if you make for Me an altar of stones ["ve-im mizbah avanim ta'aseh li] , do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them you have profaned them." (Ex. 20, 19-21)

One can simply reflect upon the fact that even the most earth shattering events, such as the Lord clearly speaking to a large assembly of people in the desert, must eventually give way to daily concerns. The moments of epiphany and revelation are not constant, and in their wake come simple everyday needs. So, if we cannot have a direct confrontation with God at every moment, still, we CAN have a place where meeting God, or at least standing in God's presence is possible at any moment - the altar.

But, the directions are confusing. Two altars are spoken of in these verses, an altar of earth ["mizbah adamah"], and an altar of stones ["mizbah avanim"]. Why two? What is the significance of one over the other? The verses demand interpretation. The simple meaning of the words seems to be that Israel should only make altars out of earth, but IF they make one out of stone, the stones should be whole ones. But, this still begs the question. If the favored default is earth, why would they want, or be allowed, to make one out of stones in the first place?

One approach to explain the problems raised is to say that the altar of earth was the one which Moses was bid to make for worship in the desert. But, when the children of Israel enter the land of Israel, then they will make an altar of stones. One Midrash takes this approach, and tries to combine the materials of the two altars into one system. Deut. 27:6 specifies that the altar (there it clearly is talking about one in the Land of Israel, or even in the Temple) be made of unhewn stones. Thus, R. Yehudah thinks that stone altar must be joined to the earth, that is built around an earthen mound. R. Meir thinks that the spot under the altar in the Temple had no floor so that the stones of the altar were connected directly to the ground (**Mekhilta d'Rashbi, 20, 21**). Here there is an attempt to combine the two and solve the problem of default versus a later desire.

But, we still may ask: what is the significance of the two materials, and what is the significance of combining them as in the Mekhilta?

Rashbam gives a simple answer to the first part of the question. He points out that God needs to make sure that the altar which Israel builds will not contain any of the graven images associated with idolatry. The earth altar is perfect for that, and is thus a default, since one cannot engrave or carve on an earthen altar. For this reason stone altars are only permitted if the stones are whole, that is, no iron tools are used in forming them. For, if iron tools were used that would provide a means and an incentive for the craftsmen to embellish the stone with figures or pictures, and this would be an idolatrous act. (**Rashbam on Ex. 20:21**)

Still, why try and combine these elements into one altar? There is a deeper significance to this. The Talmud Yerushalmi preserves a most fascinating Midrash: "The Holy One took [earth] from the place where the altar was to stand [in the Temple] and created from it the first man, saying: "let him be created from [earth

from] the spot of the altar so that he will be able to exist. [Rashi: he will have atonement available to him and that will enable him to exist.]; as it is written: "the Lord God created man from the dust of the earth" (Gen. 2:7), and it is written: "Make for Me an altar of earth" (Ex. 20:21), just as this latter earth is the altar, so the earth for man was from the altar." (**Yerushalmi Nazir 7,56,b**)

This Midrash reveals why the altar must be "grounded" in earth, even if it is made of stones (some sources say that the copper altar was also filled with earth). There is a nexus of connection between God, earth and man at the altar. Humanity was created out of the same earth from which the altar is made, or upon which the stone altar is anchored. Making an altar is thus a kind of recreation of God's making of humanity. We take earth and make it into a shape which connects us with the Divine. The graphic picture of God taking earth and forming humans, when projected on the picture of humans taking earth and making a point of connection to God, reveals a truth of cosmic importance. \*Namely, that Divine service must be inherently rooted and connected to the service of humanity. In the process of forming our altar we are recreating the concern and responsibility for humans and the world that God showed when creating humans in the first place.\* **TTT 106 B and T**

In the Babylonian Talmud Rav Anan says that whoever is buried in the Land of Israel, it is as if they are buried under the altar. In some ways the holiness of the earth on the spot of the altar was enlarged to include the earth of all of the land of Israel. Perhaps that is not so far fetched, for all of the land was fit to be a spot for an altar, only one spot was chosen, but this did not diminish the holiness of the rest of the earth of Israel. In the light of this saying, it is told of Ulla that he visited Israel very often, but died in Babylonia. This was thought to be a sad thing and R. Elazar bemoaned Ulla's fate. When Elazar was told that Ulla's coffin was being brought to Israel he said: "the land's acceptance of the living is not like the land's acceptance of the dead." (**Ketubot 111a**)

Indeed, **Rambam** mentions this incident in **Hilkot Melakhim 5:11**, and comments that even though "the land's acceptance of the living is not like the land's acceptance of the dead", nevertheless many sages sought to be buried in Israel. From this formulation we may infer that Rambam agreed that it was preferable to live in the land of Israel rather than merely to be buried there, as Elazar's dictum suggests. The same observation is appropriate in our own day.

**\*Ex. 21, 1 - 2, 5 - 6, 26 - 27**

*These are the rules that you shall set before them:*

<sup>2</sup>When you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh year he shall go free, without payment. <sup>5</sup>But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to go free," <sup>6</sup>his master shall take him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his slave for life.

<sup>26</sup>When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. <sup>27</sup>If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.

There is a strange midrash on parashat Mishpatim which can be taken to relate to the suffering which we Israelis are undergoing as a result of terrorist activities during our fight for peace. This midrash (**Pesikta Rabbati 8, 29b**) relates to why do the laws given to Israel after the revelation at Sinai begin with the laws of freeing slaves. Slaves are to be set free ("hofshi") after six years of servitude (Ex. 21:2f.) or if they are beaten by their master and damage is done to them (Ex. 21:26).

The midrash connects these laws up with the verse in Zephaniah 1:12 "I will search Jerusalem with lamps". The word 'search' is "ahapes" in Hebrew, and it is spelled with a Sin. This is the normal Hebrew word for search out, and it is understood that God will search out the sins of the people of Jerusalem with lamps, the way we search for unleavened bread with a candle on Passover eve. The context of this search is the Day of Judgment which the Lord will bring before redemption.

In this midrash, however, Rabbi Acha suggests that we not read "ahapes" with a samech sound, but that we read "shin", "ahapesh", implying a connection to the word "hofesh", freedom. Thus, the suggestion is to see the verse from Zephaniah as God's setting Jerusalem free. According to this midrash God recognizes that He has beaten Jerusalem too much. They have suffered, and now He has to set them free as His own law requires!! The midrash suggests that since the law is that a slave is freed even if one of his eyes is put out, and since God has struck both eyes of His people Israel (cf. Isa. 29:10), than certainly He has to free them from their suffering.

The boldness of this midrash is striking. God has been an abusive master to His slaves (also called His children in the midrash). His punishment brought on them for their sins has been excessive. Therefore, He has to free them from this cycle of punishment, and bring redemption to them in the form of peace and freedom from being murdered. The desire of Israel to be freed from this burden of revenge is plain in this midrash.

The first laws in this major corpus of Torah legislation are known as the laws of "eved ivri" "the Hebrew slave" (Ex. 21:1-6). It is a fitting opening to this continuation of the ten commandments, which begin "I the Lord am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage, you shall have no other gods beside Me ("al panay" lit. "before my face") (Ex. 20:2). God's Torah which Israel receives at Sinai begins with the rejection of slavery, so the continuation of the details of that Torah begins with slavery. Thus, it may be no coincidence that since 20:2 connects

the rejection of slavery with loyalty to God alone and the rejection of entertaining any other gods, that the end of the detailed legal section (end of chap. 23) specifies the rejection of the gods of Canaan.

Note the sequence of leaving the condition of slavery implying not accepting other gods. By God's actions we know that slavery, at least the Egyptian type, is rejected as a fitting condition for any of God's creatures. Presumably, other gods allow slavery in the same manner as Egypt's gods did, for that reason they are to be rejected. Yet, the law talks of a Hebrew slave ("eved ivri"). What is the difference between this type of slavery and the Egyptian one? The point of these laws is to spell out that difference, namely, that slavery is an economic status ALONE. Our tradition assumes that the economic condition of slavery does NOT change the basic moral rights and status of the person, even if they enter slavery as a result of committing a crime.

How does a Hebrew become a slave? A person who steals is punished by having to repay multiples of the value of what was stolen. If they cannot pay this from what they own, they are sold as slaves and the proceeds used to pay their debt. Even so, the laws which we read apply to that person. The law is that they must be freed, with no conditions, after 6 years of servitude. But, what if the slave wishes, of his own free choice, to stay on in servitude?

According to the first commandment, we might think that this is not possible. To choose to be a slave is to say that slavery is not merely an economic condition or a type of "job". It is to proclaim that you like to be bound to some concrete authority that can be seen and touched. This choice is somehow to reject God, the One who brought us out of slavery, and to come nearer to other gods. Thus, perhaps it is forbidden to serve another person after the six years are up? Yes and no. It is permissible, but there is a ceremony whose purpose is to remind us that this is not a good choice: "his master shall take him before the judges. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his slave for life." ("le-olam") (Ex. 21:6)

This ceremony makes it clear that something is wrong with the slave's choice. But, there are many questions. Why does the slave and the master have to appear in court? What is the significance of piercing the ear? Why does the master pierce his ear, and not the judges? There are many explications of this passage and answers to these questions in our rich literature, but for me the best summary of these is that of **R. Bahya ibn Pakuda** in his commentary on this verse.

Bahya points out that the natural thing is for a slave to detest his status and want in the worst way to be a free person. Thus, the "eved ivri" wishes to be a slave, that is, chooses a master OTHER than God, and this must be noted. Here the issue is: who gives you your orders? Who dictates the rules by which you live? Who controls your time and how it is used? Is it another person with their own interests and ultimate values, or is it God?

Bahya clarifies for us the connection between being a slave and being loyal to God. He shows us that the definition of slavery is to change the role of God in your life from that of "lawgiver", from that of ultimate authority. Any assumption of that role

by another person, or I might add, by another ideology or by a career choice is to be in the category of slave. This, says Bahya, is the reason that the master brings the slave to the court, and why the master himself, and not the court, must pierce the slave's ear as a sign of this \*change in the order of priorities\*. Perhaps, this external sign on the body now replaces the hidden sign of circumcision which is a sign of freedom, i.e. ultimate authority given to God's law.

The ear which heard the words of God "The children of Israel shall be as My slaves" (Lev. 25, 55) and rejected them has to be marked as a sign of shame. This is to be seen as a sin of alienation from God. This is the reason, says Bahya, that the term used is "eved ivri" "Hebrew slave" and not "eved Yisrael" "Israel slave". For the word "ivri", Hebrew, was the word used in Egypt to describe the slaves, but the word Israel was bestowed upon them when they received the Torah and became free, that is slaves of God.

But, Bahya has another point about this ceremony. He said that the master takes the slave and the master does the piercing, to show that the master is also a slave and subject to the laws of the Lord. That is, his "mastership" over the slave is ONLY because God compromises with His desire that all Israel be only free. They both are on probation from the court, the master to be told that he is not really the "master" of this slave, but that he is also subject to God's laws, and thus he CANNOT KEEP the slave FOREVER. The word "le-olam" is interpreted, because of the context of the law itself, to be maximum 49 years (cf. Lev. 25, 39ff.)

The context of freedom is slavery. We bind ourselves in one way or another, but ultimately we are free only when our final subjugation is to God's law. When we can free ourselves from feeling "under the control" of other human beings, of having to bend our conscience to the "rules of the game", then we stop being slaves. When our ears are able to listen to God's rules unimpeded, and when we are free of the illusion that we can or should "control" other people we are free. **TTT 107 B**

**\*Ex. 21, 35 – 36**

*<sup>35</sup>When a man's ox injures his neighbor's ox and it dies, they shall sell the live ox and divide its price; they shall also divide the dead animal. <sup>36</sup>If, however, it is known that the ox was in the habit of goring, and its owner has failed to guard it, he must restore ox for ox, but shall keep the dead animal.*

One of the most studied areas of parashat Mishpatim is the laws of damages. Many students who start to study Mishnah or Talmud are confronted with the rules of the "ox which gores", and the distinction between a "Tam" and a "Muad". The term "Tam" designates an animal which gores without a proven previous history of goring. Whereas, "Muad" designates an animal with such a history. The difference in the law of the Torah is in the damages for which the owner of the animal is liable. The owner of a "Tam" is liable for half the value of the damages, and the owner of a "Muad" is liable for the full damages.

These terms are not found, per se, in the Torah, yet they are intrinsic to the Talmudic discussion of the laws. In Mishpatim we read: "When a man's ox injures his neighbor's ox and it dies, they shall sell the live ox and divide its price; they shall also divide the dead animal. If, however, it is known ["oh noda' "] that the ox was in



the habit of goring ["mitmol shilshom"], and its owner has failed to guard it, he must restore ox for ox, but shall keep the dead animal." (Ex. 21:35-36)

Happy are they who only read the Torah in English! The problems in the Hebrew text seem to disappear. The Hebrew word "oh", which we usually take to mean, or, is here translated, if. Most commentators accept this. But, the Hebrew word "noda" is difficult. The translation "it is known" leaves much unknown. To whom is it known? How is it known? Even this difficulty pales in comparison with the Hebrew phrase "mitmol Shilshom", translated here as "in the habit of". Literally the phrase means "[today,] yesterday and the day before".

Now most people who know Hebrew will identify the word "noda" as the same root as the word "Muad", and realize that the term has to do with a history of goring. **Rambam**, apparently following his understanding of the Talmud, defines our terms as follows: "[A creature] that acts in its usual way, in the way it was created to act, is called a "Muad". [A creature] that changes this [natural] way and acts in a way in which its kind usually does not act, for example, an ox which gores or bites, is called a "Tam." [A creature] which changes its normal way of acting many times, becomes a "Muad" for that kind of action, as it is written: "if it becomes known as [designated as] a goring ox" (Ex. 21, 36) (**Nizkei Mamon 1, 4**)

The point is that an action which is not the norm, can turn into an action which is the norm. Rambam seems to understand "Tam" to mean, "end, finish". That is, the normal course is ended. But, the law demands that in any particular case there be a procedure which designates the particular creature as "in the habit of", "Muad". The term "Muad" thus, seems to mean "designated as", and it signifies normal activity, as well as an habitual change of action which then becomes the norm.

How is this designation arrived at? The Mishnah spells it out: "What is tam, and what is mu'ad? — [cattle become] mu'ad after [the owner has] been warned for three days [regarding the acts of goring], but [return to the state of] tam after refraining from goring for three days; these are the words of R. Judah. R. Meir, however, says: [cattle become] mu'ad after [the owner has] been warned three times [even on the same day], and [become again] tam when children keep on touching them and no goring results." (**BK 2, 4**) There is a dispute over what is acceptable as evidence of habit. R. Yehudah thinks it must include separate acts on different days, a continuum of time doing the same acts. R. Meir thinks that it depends on the number of warnings, even in the same day.

The Talmud on this Mishnah makes it clear that it is a difference over interpreting our verse (36). R. Yehudah relates to the words "mitmol shilshom" as fixing that the passage of time is the essential ingredient, the same act over more than three days. R. Meir uses logic. He accepts R. Yehudah's interpretation of the verse, but he reasons, if the Torah designates the ox as an habitual goring ox over a long period of time, i. e. three days, it surely makes sense that it would so designate the ox if its goring were closer together in time. (**BK 23b-24a**) That is, the Torah, according to R. Meir gives us a difficult case, and we are to understand the easier one by ourselves.

It seems to me that the difference between them is over how do we judge "unusual" behavior which causes damage. Do we absolve the creature if the behavior is not

consistent over a long period of time? Indeed, R. Yehudah thinks that the Muad returns to the status of Tam if it does not gore for three days, even if it had gored three days before! R. Meir, on the other hand, judges by the behavior itself, not the time frame. If an ox gores three [or four] times in one day, that is enough for R. Meir. It is the character that he judges. This is also clear from his test to absolve an ox, namely, that a child can romp with it and come to no harm.

The approach of R. Meir, namely that it is the number of times that counts and not the passage of time, is used in a fascinating situation by R. Meir of Rotenberg. Both the **Tur (OH 114)** and **Sefer Abudarham (shmonah esreh)**, report that on Shemini Atzeret, R. Meir would recite the first blessing of the Amidah until "mashiv ha-ruah..." 90 times!! The Halakha was that if one forgot to recite "mashiv ha-ruah..." after Shemini Atzeret, one had to go back to the beginning of the Amidah. This applied for 30 days after the holiday. If, after 30 days, one forgot to recite the phrase, one did NOT have to go back (cf. **Yer. Ta'anit 1, hal. 1**).

R. Meir of Rotenberg, relying on the approach of R. Meir in the Mishnah, reasoned that if one recited "mashiv ha-ruah..." 90 times, then one would not be obliged to go back to the beginning of the Amidah from then on. If the Talmud designates that after 30 days, 3 times a day, one does not have to return, then surely it surely makes sense that it would so designate if one said the phrase 90 times in one day! [cf. Abudarham there] It reminds me of the prayer wheels of the far east, a kind of automatic fulfilling of an obligation. Perhaps this is the reason that this custom is not accepted by the Tur nor by Abudarham. To fulfill an obligation should depend upon consistent behavior over a long period of time. **TTT 108 HA**

**\*Ex. 24, 1 - 3**

*Then He said to Moses, "Come up to the LORD, with Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel, and bow low from afar. <sup>2</sup>Moses alone shall come near the LORD; but the others shall not come near, nor shall the people come up with him." <sup>3</sup>Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the LORD and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, "All the things that the LORD has commanded we will do!"*

The continuity of events surrounding Matan Torah are the subject of much debate in our traditional sources. Just what happened, and what was the sequence of events?

In last week's parasha, Yitro, we are told that Israel arrives at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19:1-2). Then Moses ascends the mountain to God (v. 3), and God calls to him saying that if Israel accepts God and God's commandments they will be a holy nation (v. 3-6). Then Moses goes to the leaders of the people and tells them what God said (v.7). Then all of the people answer that whatever God says they will do, and Moses takes this reply back to God (v. 8). There is more to this story, but the continuation is that the people hear God's voice speaking to them from the mountain, and the 10 commandments are recited.

This week's parasha opens with laws which are placed before the nation, and the Midrash wants to make it clear that these laws were part of the revelation at Sinai in which the people heard God's voice. Despite the Midrash, the fact is that these laws are placed before the people by Moses. Furthermore, at the end of this week's

parasha (chap. 24) there is another account of how Moses brings God's word to the people, and it is not exactly like the account in chapter 19.

The account in chapter 24 seems confused in itself, let alone in its discrepancies from chapter 19. Here, God tells Moses and Aaron and his sons and the 70 leaders to ascend towards him. Then it says that Moses alone approached God (v. 1-2). Then it says that Moses told ("va-yesaper") the nation all of the laws that God had given them, and the nation answers with one voice ("kol ehad") that they will do whatever God has said (v. 3). Then Moses writes all of God's words down in a book, and builds an altar. He then proceeds to sacrifice to God, sprinkling half the blood on the altar. He then reads the book to the people, and they respond saying that all God has spoken they will do and listen to ("na'aseh ve-nishma" v. 4-7). Then Moses sprinkles the other half of the blood on the people, in the classical ritual of covenant (v.8), and then the whole contingent ascends to God (v. 9).

There is a genuine debate among the Meforshim as to whether these verses represent an actual sequence of events (**Ramban**), or whether they do not (**Rashi**). Even though the Midrash stresses that the "vav" at the beginning of the parasha is to show that these laws are part of the revelation at Sinai, Rashi, and others, taking an approach which is ALSO interested in Peshat, implies that other laws, such as the 7 Noahide laws are included here. (Please look at Rashi and Ramban on these verses, particularly **Ramban on 24:1-3**. This is a complex and long debate over the sequence of revelation, and the content of revelation at each stage.)

Ramban, in his commentary on 24:1, rejects Rashi's interpretation of the events. He holds that these laws were already known to the Israelites, and that the word "va-yesaper", telling, implies something new. **R. Elijah Mizrahi** (d. 1526) wrote a supercommentary on Rashi, in which he defends Rashi against Ramban's criticism. Mizrahi points out that Radak (R. David Kimhi) in his book Sefer ha-Shorashim, on Hebrew grammar and syntax, says that the word "le-saper" always refers to something which was already done or said, like the English word "recounts". The Hebrew word for telling something new is "le-haggid", according to Radak. In that case, Rashi would be vindicated, i.e. Moses was going over laws already known. Note that if we adopt Radak's understanding, that would mean that the Haggada of Pesach is not meant to be a mere "recounting" of the Exodus, but a retelling with NEW insights.

At any rate the **Mechilta of Rashbi (on 24:3, Epstein/Melamed p. 220)**, learns that the laws of Mishpatim were also part of the revelation at Sinai from 24:3: "Moses came and told the nation all of the words of the Lord and ALL OF THE LAWS...". This certainly seems to be a more straightforward analogy than the "vav" of "va-eleh ha-mishpatim". This Midrash goes on to interpret the continuation of the verse: "all the people answered with one voice" ("kol ehad"), that no one consulted any one else ("she-lo natlu eitzah zeh mi-zeh"). **TTT 109 H and T and B**

That is, each individual heard God's laws and decided in their own heart and mind that these were good, and that they would make a personal commitment to them, without any thought of what the others were doing. Social pressure or social standing were NOT part of the decision to keep God's laws. Here the Midrash assumes that the covenant that Israel accepted with God was based on individual

autonomy, and that no one was forced to accept the covenant merely because they were part of the group!

The parallel to this verse is in 19:8: "the nation answered together ("yahdav")...". The word together ("yahdav") usually implies "of one mind", as in the Akedah story "va-yelchu shenaihem yahdav" (cf. **Gen. R. 56:3** etc.). At first glance this might seem to take an opposite approach to the way Israel accepted God's Torah, that is, not each one individually, but all with the same mind, as a collective. However, it is possible to understand the deeper meaning of these two verses as part of the same approach. That is to say that at some level our acceptance of Judaism and the Jewish way of life needs to be grounded in personal commitment and not merely group identity. And, the integrity of the group, its "yahdav", is preserved by accepting all of the different individual voices ("kol ehad") as legitimate expressions of Israel's acceptance of the Torah. **TTT 109 P and K**

**\*Ex. 24, 3 – 7**

*<sup>3</sup>Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the LORD and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, "All the things that the LORD has commanded we will do!" <sup>4</sup>Moses then wrote down all the commands of the LORD.*

*Early in the morning, he set up an altar at the foot of the mountain, with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup>He designated some young men among the Israelites, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to the LORD. <sup>6</sup>Moses took one part of the blood and put it in basins, and the other part of the blood he dashed against the altar. <sup>7</sup>Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the LORD has spoken we will faithfully do!"*

After God's revelation to the people Israel, read in last week's parasha, the people now are instructed in "mishpatim" (JPS "rules"), legal matters. The exact process and sequence of revelation and instruction is not clear in the Torah. This unclarity leads to much discussion and debate in Rabbinic literature. In general, we can say that God speaks directly to the nation at Sinai (Ex. 20:1), at least the 10 commandments (or part of them); and, Moses sets before them the legal matters which make up most of this week's parasha (Ex. 21:1; 24:3,7).

How does the nation Israel respond? In Ex. 19 when Moses tells Israel that God has chosen them to receive the Torah and will make a covenant with them to become a holy nation, they respond by saying: "All the people answered as one, saying, "All that the Lord has spoken we will do ("na'aseh")!" And Moses brought back the people's words to the Lord." (v. 8) In the context it seems as if Israel's response is consent to the covenant and to the rules of the Torah, agreeing to DO them. But, after the tumultuous events of Sinai, the people are hesitant about any more direct contact with God. Moses now becomes the one who goes back and forth to receive God's rules, and brings them to Israel, in a kind of "shuttle revelation".

This time we are told: "Moses went and repeated to the people all the commands of the Lord and all the rules; and all the people answered with one voice, saying, "All the things that the Lord has commanded we will do ("na'aseh")!" Moses then wrote down all the commands of the Lord." This seems to be identical to the verse in chapter 19. But, there are significant differences. In 19 the answer is the Hebrew "va-ya'an", they answered, in the plural, and in 24 the Hebrew is "va-ya'an", in the

singular. But, even more striking is that in verse 7 we read: "Then he took the record of the covenant and read it aloud to the people. And they said, "All that the Lord has spoken we will faithfully do! ("na'aseh ve-nishma")." Moses, instead of orally reporting what God has commanded, reads all the rules from a book, "the record of the covenant". To this the people respond "na'aseh ve-nishma", literally "we will do, and we will hear". The word "nishma", "to hear", is added, and it is taken to mean, "seek to understand". Why does Israel add the notion of understanding to the notion of compliance?

**Ibn Ezra** gives 4 different ways of interpreting the addition of "ve-nishma". He points out that it is added only after Moses reads the rules to them from the book. The first meaning, thus, is:

1. "we will DO all that is written, and we will continue to "hear" them, that is recite them by learning them (**on Ex. 24:7, short version**). In this way, Israel continues to reenact Moses reading of the law for all time.

Ibn Ezra then gives three more possible understandings:

2. we will DO the commandments implanted in our hearts, that is the ones that make sense to us or fit our human nature; and we will HEAR, in the sense of "accept", the dictates of tradition, even if they don't seem to make sense.

3. we will DO all of the commandments given to us up to now; and we will Hear, obey or understand, those that will come in the future.

4. we will DO all of the positive commandments; and we will understand, but NOT DO, all of the negative commandments.

Now, each one of these interpretations is interesting in itself. But, the whole enterprise is called into question by the fact that after the covenant has been sealed with this most energetic declaration of "na'aseh ve-nishma", the nation turns around and makes a golden calf, and worships it (cf. **Rashi on Deut. 32:20**). Indeed, the problematics of the "na'aseh ve-nishma" declaration are stated most dramatically in a striking and astonishing passage in the Tosefta (**BK 7:8-9, et al**). The Tosefta is ruling on thievery, and talks of 7 types of thieves. The first one is: "[he] who deceives their fellow" ("gonev da'at ha-beriyot"). The other 6 are all examples of deception, each example being more subtle than the former. The final example is: one who mixes vinegar in olive oil [that he is selling], even though it is said "that olive oil cannot be noticeably doctored, which is why it is used to anoint kings."

Our revered teacher, Rabbi Saul Lieberman, explains that the thief in question contends that the vinegar helps to preserve the oil. That is the deception has a good pretext that might convince the unknowing buyer to accept such oil (**Tosefta ki-feshuta, BK, p. 69**). This kind of subtle subterfuge is credited with the following description in the continuation of the Tosefta passage: "on this kind of deception, it is as if the person attempts to deceive the Highest One." There is a measure of truth in his assertion. Lieberman points out that it was thought at the time that some salt added to olive oil helped to preserve it. It is not as if there is never ANY additive to the oil, and furthermore the deceived buyer SEES that the oil is not clear. Olive oil is

not subject to deception. But, it is clear to the Tosefta that all of this is merely an excuse for the seller to make more money on the deal.

The striking and astonishing part is that the Tosefta continues this train of thought by saying: "This is as we find that when Israel was standing by Mt. Sinai they attempted to deceive the Most High ("lignov da'at Elyonah") by saying: "na'aseh ve-nishma". It is as if ("kivyachol") they did steal His confidence, as is written: [God says] "...May they always be of such mind, to revere Me and follow all My commandments..." (Deut. 5:25)."

The Tosefta considers this classic statement of Israel's acceptance of the Torah as a deception!! It is a subtle one, as is the deception of vinegar in olive oil. Maybe they really think that they want to accept the Torah. Maybe they know that God knows everything, and cannot be deceived, as olive oil cannot visibly be doctored. Still, they are leaving their options open for a better deal, which later they THINK will be the golden calf. The Tosefta thinks that the deception is spelled out in Ps. 78:36-37: "Yet they deceived Him with their speech, lied to Him with their words; their hearts were inconstant toward Him; they were untrue to His covenant." Yet, the Tosefta says, God's mercy accepts this deception, as Psalm 78:38 is the answer: "But He, being merciful, forgave iniquity and would not destroy; He restrained His wrath time and again and did not give full vent to His fury." (This is the opening verse of the evening service.) TTT 110

Why does God do this? Of course, God is merciful, but when one KNOWS that one is being deceived isn't there a limit to mercy? Maybe God has a sign that his mercy is NOT misplaced. This brings me to Ibn Ezra's fifth explanation of the addition of "ve-nishma". [In case you thought I forgot :)]

Ibn Ezra explains that the first "na'aseh" of chap. 19 was only general assent to listen to God's voice, to accept the IDEA of a covenant with God. There were no specifics. Then God revealed the 10 commandments. But, then God started having Moses spell out all the details: Laws of servants, laws of theft, laws of damages and responsibility for negligence etc. All of these laws need and demand HUMAN judgement to implement them. The people begin to understand that the Torah is not just dictates from God that they have to take and literally apply. They begin to understand that their UNDERSTANDING of the laws is an integral part of the covenant! "Mishpatim", legal matters, require sages that study Torah and understand it. This accords with the beautiful Midrash of Rabbi (Judah ha-Nasi) who said in praise of Israel, that when they stood at Sinai to receive the Torah, they heard the words and immediately interpreted them, as is written: "they were surrounded [by the words], and they tried to understand them" ("yesovevenhu yevoneneihu" Dt. 32:10), since they heard the Word, they interpreted it ["keivan sh-hayu shomin ha-dibur mefarshim oto"]. (**Mekhilta d'R. Yishmael, ba-hodesh Yitro 9**). TTT 110 P and K and HA

Thus, the addition of "ve-nishma", emphasizes that Israel is a partner with God in the creation of Torah, from the very beginning. It is when God hears that Israel is willing to become involved in the process of understanding Torah in order to implement it, that God uses that willingness to overlook the fact that there might be a hidden desire to deceive Him.

It is very difficult to assent to accepting the "yoke of the commandments" with total honesty. Indeed, most people might feel that they leave a way out, even as they profess their loyalty to Torah and mitzvot. It is even difficult to maintain honesty in the process of interpretation or search for the truth of what the Torah is revealing to us. Perhaps this Tosefta is teaching us a profound lesson, namely, that there is NO "perfect faith" ("emunah sheleimah"). No human can achieve faith that is totally free of deception. **TTT 110 K**

But, the accepting of responsibility of partnership is expressed in the addition of "venishma". This responsibility to the covenant mitigates the deception, and at least creates a standard to which we can aspire. This is why the value of truth and honesty are so great in our Masorti methods of Torah study. These values are central to making the responsibility of partnership an honest responsibility. We are committed to honest study of the texts and past history of our traditions because that is the only way that we can justify God's mercy towards us in overlooking the possible deception at Sinai.

**\*Ex. 24, 9-11**

*Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites ("ve-el atzilei bnei yisrael lo shalah yado"); they beheld God, and they ate and drank."*

After the dramatic revelation of God to all of Israel, come a long series of laws. But, the question of revelation, and more specifically the question of who comes close to God to receive revelation, is still an issue. After the chapters of laws, once again Moses is told to ascend the mountain, but this time with Nadav and Avihu and the seventy elders. This entourage ascends, only Moses is allowed to come close. What follows is a sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood of the sacrifice to indicate a covenant between God, Moses, the leaders, and the people.

We read: *"Then Moses and Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and seventy elders of Israel ascended; and they saw the God of Israel: under His feet there was the likeness of a pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity. Yet He did not raise His hand against the leaders of the Israelites ("ve-el atzilei bnei yisrael lo shalah yado"); they beheld God, and they ate and drank."* (Ex. 24, 9-11) These verses are remarkable for the description of God's throne (I have dealt with that elsewhere). But, even more remarkable, for me is verse 11. Who are these "leaders"? The Hebrew "atzilei" implies nobles. It is a strange word to appear here. Furthermore, the verse indicates that instead of being punished, they were able to behold God and celebrate that experience by food and drink. What is remarkable about God not raising his hand against them, why should he?

In Ex. 24, 5 the sacrifices which accompany this covenant are offered up by "naarei benei yisrael", which JPS translates "young men among the Israelites". Again, a surprising verse. Who are these "young men", where are the priests? Is there a connection between these "young men" and the "nobles", "atzilim", of verse 11? One text makes a connection, and it is fascinating. In the minor tractate **Kallah Rabbati (2, 3)**, we find the following: "one who avoids a transgression and does not commit it, even if he is an Israelite, is worthy to offer a sacrifice as the high priest. As it is

written: "He designated some young men among the Israelites, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed bulls as offerings of well-being to the Lord." (Ex. 24, 5) So, the point is that these young men were particularly worthy of offering the covenantal sacrifice because they had superb moral qualities, they always avoided transgression, and even though tempted did not commit any.

Our text goes on to say: "and one who makes himself lazy (slack "'atzal") about committing a transgression in this world, and does not commit it, enjoys the Divine presence in the world to come, as it is written: "they beheld God, and they ate and drank." Now, it is clear that this text understands that the "leaders", the "atzilim", who beheld the Divine presence, merited that experience because they were "lazy", "'atzal", about committing transgressions. It also seems that they are parallel to, or perhaps the same as, the young men who offered sacrifices. Both groups, or if they are the same they, exhibit the outstanding moral characteristic of refraining from transgression. There is only one problem: our verse talks about "atzil" written with an aleph, meaning noble; and this text understands it as written "'atzal" written with an ayin.

The way of phrasing these qualities is odd. One refrains from transgression by "evacuating himself" from it, actually removing himself from the region where transgression abounds. The other is "slack, lazy" about transgression. What can that mean?

The word 'atzal, with an ayin, appears in the Bible only in the book of Proverbs. It is a favorite of that book. The "'atzal" is told to study the ants to learn diligence (Prov. 6, 6). JPS translates it there as "lazybones". Similarly, it translates Proverbs 21, 25 as "The craving of a lazy man ("'atzal") kills him, For his hands refuse to work." In Proverbs 24, 30 the 'atzal is characterized as lacking sense. In Proverbs 26, 13-16, the 'atzal is characterized as one who turns on his bed, like a door on its hinge. A person who thinks they are wise, but has no advice to give. The picture that develops is of someone who does nothing with fervor, who refrains from taking on any task that would require effort. The 'atzal is unconcerned, indifferent. So, this word, used in Proverbs only in a negative sense, is praiseworthy when it comes to transgressions!

But, what are we to do with the spelling of "atzilei" in our verse with an aleph? Our text is also concerned with this issue, and queries itself on this point. The conclusion is that the spelling is influenced by the emanation, "atzilut", of God's spirit on these people. It is an innocent way of referring to them, and implies that God's spirit works on a person to make them lazy about transgression. Their vigor and energy are committed to Godly acts, and acts of compassion, fairness and justice. They may be highly motivated in those areas, while totally lazy when it comes to acts that lack those qualities. But, this makes the question about why God would want to smite them even more serious. Why does the Torah specify that God did nothing to them?

One Midrash connects the young men who perform the sacrifices with the two mentioned here, Nadav and Avihu. They also were privileged to have God's spirit rest on them. But, this Midrash interprets the end of the verse about eating and drinking in a negative way. They were honored to have a vision of God, but they were so arrogant that for them it was like a good banquet. That is, the seeing of



God's presence, an overpowering spiritual experience, is turned by them into a sensual experience. It is perhaps the epitome of idolatry. (Ex. R. 3, 3)

This Midrash understands that despite their arrogance, despite their turning an event of spiritual and moral power into a vulgar sensual banquet, God did not harm them. The Midrash ends with astonishment: "And they received no punishment for what they did?" The implication is clear. Here, they were not punished, perhaps because, despite all, they were serving Israel. But, later on we know that they are killed when approaching the altar. They could not rid themselves of their arrogance, and so in the end it causes them to be consumed.

**\*Ex. 25, 1 – 2, 8**

*The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>2</sup>Tell the Israelite people to bring Me gifts; you shall accept gifts for Me from every person whose heart so moves him. <sup>8</sup>And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them.*

There are verses which are like hinges of a door. The door rests upon them, and they become the instruments that allow the door to open. These are central verses that produce such a wide range and variety of commentary that the single verse and its exegesis could be the basis for a whole year's course. Such a verse is found in our parasha: "And let them make Me a sanctuary that I may dwell among them." (ve-'asu li mikdash ve-shakhanti be-tokham") (Ex. 25:8)

This verse is used, for example, to prove the importance of labor, and that it is on a par with Torah. Just as Torah was given by means of a covenant; so human labor is given by means of a covenant. This is the meaning of the verse: "Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the LORD your God" (Ex. 20:9-10) R. Tarfon, in this Midrash, adds that God's presence did not dwell among Israel until they had labored, that is, they have to first "make" the sanctuary, and only then will God dwell among them. (cf. **Avot d'R Nathan, A, 11**)

I, however, want to concentrate on another direction of the Midrash tradition on our verse. The sanctuary in the desert is provisional. The Temple, built in Jerusalem, gets all the attention. Why build a provisional tent, when the goal of leaving Egypt is to enter the land and to build a Temple? One attempt at answering this question is found in the Talmud, which comments that we find that sometimes the Temple (mikdash) is called a Tabernacle (Mishkan), e. g. Lev. 26:11; and sometimes the Mishkan is called a mikdash, e. g. our verse (**Eruvin 2a-b**). There is a certain continuity which carries over from the desert to the land. The physical building can be provisional, and change into permanent, but there must be a physical beginning. Indeed, without this beginning, perhaps there would have not been success in building the Temple.

But, there is a further reason for this urgent need, which cannot wait to be fulfilled, to always have a physical presence. This is brought home in a story of Rabbi's (R. Judah) son, whose designated wife dies before the wedding. Then Rabbi makes preparation for his son to marry into the family of R. Jose b. Zimra. The Talmud then relates: "It was agreed that he [Rabbi's son] should spend twelve years at the academy [before the wedding]. When the girl was led before him he said to them, 'Let it be six years'. When they made her pass before him [a second time] he said, 'I would rather marry [her first] and then proceed [to the academy]'. He felt abashed before his father, but the latter said to him. 'My son, you have the mind of your creator; for in Scripture it is written first, "Bring them in and plant them" (Ex. 15:17, i. e., only after settlement in the land was the Temple, the symbol of the union between God and Israel, to be built.) and later it is written, "And let them make Me a sanctuary. that I may dwell among them."' (Ket. 62b)

God's desire for closeness, for partnership, is the motivation for building a Tabernacle in the wilderness. Indeed, this Midrashic tradition notes that "from the

beginning of creation of the world, God has passionately sought partnership with his creatures" (**Gen. R. 3, 9**) Just as Rabbi's son cannot wait for his bride, so, God can't wait for Israel to come into the land to create the conditions of covenant and partnership. The Mishkan is a symbol of the ongoing relationship of love, covenant and partnership between God and Israel.

The same idea of the Mishkan being an instrument and expression of the closeness between God and humans is expressed in another parable. This Midrash 'asks is it possible that a thing is sold to another, and the seller is sold along with the object'? The Holy One says to Israel: "I sold you my Torah, and I am sold, as it were, along with it, as it says: "take me as a gift" [Ex. 25:2, the Midrash's reading of "va-yikhu li terumah"]." It explains this by a parable of a king whose only daughter is married to a king from another land. When this king requested his leave, the daughter's father says: "my daughter which I have given to you is an only child, I cannot bear to be parted from her. I cannot tell you do not go away, since she is your wife, so do me this favor. Every place that you go make a suite for me to live in with you. Thus did the Holy One say to Israel, I have given you my Torah. I cannot separate myself from it, and I cannot tell you not to take it [since it is yours], but everywhere you go make a place for me to dwell with you." (**Ex. R. 33, 1**)

This take on God's need for closeness sees the Mishkan as a "parents' suite" near the children. But the point here is that their relationship is through a common bond, the bond of Torah. Even though Torah, in this Midrash, literally "belongs" to Israel, namely they have acquired it, it is a special kind of purchase, a kind where the seller's attachment to it is intrinsic. The formal relationship of responsibility between parent and child is changed by marriage, and a new relationship of responsibility is created between husband and wife. Despite that, and we all recognize this, the old feelings and sense of rightness about the parent's continuing connection to and sense of responsibility for the married child, in some sense, remains. A room for the visiting parents is a concrete expression of that. **TTT 111 B and T**

Here the Mishkan is a place where Torah is treasured and developed. While the Torah is given to us, it should never be devoid of expressing the continuing connection of God to Torah. We can infer from these Midrashim that the Synagogue is really a continuation of the Mishkan/mikdash. It is a place where God's presence should be felt both in acts of love, devotion and getting closer to God, as well as in Torah.

So, how do we achieve all of this? One striking Midrash inspires me. " "Bring Me gifts" (Ex. 25:2). When the Holy One told Moses about the Mishkan, Moses [was astounded] and replied: 'Master of the World, is it possible for Israel to do all of this?!' The Holy One replied: 'even a single person can do it all, as it says: "from every person as their heart so moves them" (ibid.)' (**Ex. R. 33, 8**) This Midrash goes on to explain that when Jacob told Israel that they would be freed from bondage, and that God would ask them to build a Mishkan, "there were those who prepared themselves for this task, and there were those who forgot." And thus, when Moses requested the gifts of building, "there were those who brought gifts and themselves, and those who only could bring what [material] things they had on hand."

Each individual can make a whole Mishkan, or even be a Mishkan. But, to do that one must prepare oneself, for the task is not only giving up some of what one has on hand, but one must give of themselves. Not only give of their talents or time, but literally give "themselves". This seems, to me, to be a call for identifying with God, with the need for closeness to God, with the love for and responsibility towards Torah. If individual Jews can prepare themselves in this manner, then the task can be completed. **TTT 111 P and K**

In many modern texts the state of Israel is compared to the Mishkan/mikdash. We read of Israel being referred to as "ha-bayit ha-shelishi", the third Temple. In a way these voices have combined the idea of Temple and land. In the Midrashic tradition which I have explained here, the two are joined, but not the same. To make a Mishkan/mikdash demands more than just putting together the physical elements of a tent or Temple, or of a modern state. In order to have it become a place in which God dwells, each individual must be prepared to give of themselves, to devote themselves to making God's presence manifest in their actions, to promote and cultivate Torah, and to create a society based on love and decency.

**\*Ex. 25, 10 - 11**

<sup>10</sup>*They shall make an ark of acacia wood, two and a half cubits long, a cubit and a half wide, and a cubit and a half high.* <sup>11</sup>*Overlay it with pure gold – overlay it inside and out – and make upon it a gold molding round about.*

This week's parasha begins with the instructions for building the Tabernacle and all of its vessels. The central feature is the holy ark, "aron ha-kodesh", in which the tablets of the covenant are placed. In the Talmud Yerushalmi there is an involved and fascinating discussion about the details of these instructions. There is more than one opinion on everything, the dimensions of the vessels, what was placed in the ark, and the nature of the very tablets themselves. (**Yerushalmi Shekalim 6, 49d, halakha 1; cf. Yerushalmi Sotah 8, 22d, halakha 3**).

Wait, you say, the dimensions for the ark are specified in the Torah, two and a half cubits ("amah") in length, and a cubit and a half in width! Furthermore, the Torah specifies there that the ark is to be made out of acacia wood and "Overlay it with pure gold—overlay it inside and out—and make upon it a gold molding round about". (Ex. 25, 10-11) Ah, but the question debated in the Yerushalmi is: how many handbreadths ("tefah") to a cubit ("amah"). I will use the Hebrew terms because they make as much sense to an English speaker as "cubit" or "handbreadth", and just slightly more sense to a Hebrew speaker who knows that they refer to the length from elbow to end of hand, the middle finger, and the width of a hand opened from tip of thumb to tip of little finger.

R. Meir believes that there are 6 tefahim to an amah, and Resh Lakish thinks there are 5 tefahim to an amah. They both base themselves on the opinion of R. Judah, ben Ilai, who says: "the amah of the building was 6 tefahim, but the amah of vessels was 5 tefahim". Thus, according to R. Meir the ark is 15 tefahim long and 9 tefahim wide, and according to Resh Lakish the ark is 12 tefahim long and 7 1/2 tefahim wide. By the way, no one describes height. Aside from the very complicated calculations about the physical size of the ark and how the tablets fit in it, what difference does this debate make?

One difference, directly related to size, is whether the Sefer Torah which Moses wrote, the one upon which all the "halakha le-moshe mi-sinai" rules of writing a Sefer Torah are based, can fit inside the ark, or if it is to be placed on a ledge next to the ark. I have already dealt with this issue:

"The reason that I find this debate fascinating is because it is literally about "what is the place of the Sefer Torah as a document of Revelation?" Of course, literal place reveals attitudes about figurative place. There is no question that we are talking here of TWO SEPARATE ENTITIES, the Tablets from God and a Sefer Torah written by Moses. That the Tablets from God must be placed in the Ark seems to be unquestioned. Indeed, even the fragments of the first tablets smashed by Moses are inside the Ark. But, what of the Torah? Is it inside the Ark, but at the side, or is it outside of the ark on a shelf connected to the ark?

Does the difference in "place" imply a difference of holiness? The Tablets may be holy because they are the work of God, and a symbol of DIRECT REVELATION. But, the Torah, even if it is the word of God, is written down by Moses, filtered through his brain and his being." (cf. **BB 14b**)

One other difference, implied in the Yerushalmi debate, is whether the ark is to be considered a "vessel" or a "building". If the ark is thought of as a vessel, merely an implement of the building, then there is no room for it to house a Sefer Torah, but if the ark is thought of as a building in itself then it houses both Divine revelation and human reaction to that revelation. Is the ark just a depository of the word of God, or is it a space that invites us to participate in developing God's words? Is the human contribution to revelation outside of sacred space, or is it inside the sacred space? I dare say that this question is still central for us today. It is the crucial question of how do we use the space that we have created in our synagogues. How do we use the space we have set aside for sacred time and for holy occasions? **TTT 112 T and B and K**

An answer to this question is suggested by the next section of our Yerushalmi passage which deals with the tablets themselves. What is the relationship between the wood and the gold? I imagine that wood symbolizes humanity, the physical which can rot, and gold symbolizes the Divine. According to R. Hanina, Bezalel made three boxes, two of gold and one of wood. He placed the smallest, by a finger, gold box inside the middle sized box of wood. Then he placed both of them inside the largest box of gold. Thus, the ark was formed. According to Resh Lakish Bezalel made just one box of wood and the gold was laid on the outside and inside of the box. Resh Lakish, who allows for no space for the Sefer Torah inside the ark, does not allow independence for physical humanity, the wood. It is merely there to give something for the gold to be attached to. **TTT 112 K**

R. Hanina, presumably accepting R. Meir's view that the Sefer Torah was included inside the ark, sees physical humanity as having its own independent function. The gold of Divine spirit is both within and without that independent existence. The wood both supports Divinity and is supported by Divinity. In our terms, the space of the synagogue both supports those who come into it, but it also offers them the opportunity to support the Divine, something that is larger and greater than themselves. **TTT 112 K**

Further light on our question is shed by the next section of our Yerushalmi passage. This section debates how the words appear on the tablets themselves. I have already referred to the magnificent passage in the **Mekhilta d'R. Ishmael (Yitro ba-hodesh, 8)** :

"The message of the Midrash is that all of the 10 commandments are related and depend on one another, in that in order to understand the meaning and proper application of each, reference must be made to all the others."

This is based upon the reading of the Mekhilta of the view of R. Hananyah ben Gamliel that there were 5 of the ten commandments on each tablet, facing each other. This is also the first opinion here in the Yerushalmi. The rabbis say that there were all ten of the commandments on each tablet, again like the Mekhilta. But, our Yerushalmi passage continues with exuberance. R. Shimon b. Yohai says that there were 20 on each tablet, which I take to mean that each tablet had the ten commandments twice. R. Simlai says that there were 40 commandments on each tablet. He accepts Rashbi's view, but points out that the commandments were written on both sides of the tablets (cf. Ex. 32, 15), thus 40. Finally, Hananyah the son of R. Yehoshua's brother says: "between each commandment and commandment appeared the precise and minute details of each one, shining like a bright day".

For Hananyah the space between the lines contains the fine print. I understand him to mean that the Oral Torah of Moses and the sages is on the tablets in between the lines. The human contribution to revelation merges with God's word to form a glowing and living whole. The feeling that my own study and sensibilities are part of Torah is powerful. It is the goal we seek when we enter the sacred space.

Resh Lakish praises Hananyah's image of the tablets having both the written Torah and the Oral Torah. He adds his own image to bolster Hananyah's opinion: "just as in the sea between one large wave and the next large wave there are many smaller waves, so between each commandment and commandment appeared the precise and minute details of each one". This gives us new insight into the idea of Torah as a sea. Not only is Torah vast like the sea, but Torah includes the big waves and the small ones, great ideas of great sages and my own small individual insights, all blending into an awe inspiring experience which evokes blessings from our lips. **TTT 112 K and P**

**\*Ex. 25, 31 – 40**

<sup>31</sup>You shall make a lampstand of pure gold; the lampstand shall be made of hammered work; its base and its shaft, its cups, calyxes, and petals shall be of one piece. <sup>32</sup>Six branches shall issue from its sides; three branches from one side of the lampstand and three branches from the other side of the lampstand. <sup>33</sup>On one branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals, and on the next branch there shall be three cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals; so for all six branches issuing from the lampstand. <sup>34</sup>And on the lampstand itself there shall be four cups shaped like almond-blossoms, each with calyx and petals: <sup>35</sup>a calyx, of one piece with it, under a pair of branches; and a calyx, of one piece with it, under the second pair of branches, and a calyx, of one piece with it, under the last pair of branches; so for all six branches issuing from the lampstand. <sup>36</sup>Their calyxes and their stems shall be of one piece with it, the whole of it a single hammered

*piece of pure gold. <sup>37</sup>Make its seven lamps – the lamps shall be so mounted as to give the light on its front side – <sup>38</sup>and its tongs and fire pans of pure gold. <sup>39</sup>It shall be made, with all these furnishings, out of a talent of pure gold. <sup>40</sup>Note well, and follow the patterns for them that are being shown you on the mountain.*

Throughout all generations the rabbis sought out moral lessons in every detail of the structure of the Tabernacle, the design of its vessels and their placement within the Tabernacle. One of the best known vessels is the Menorah, which was a symbol of Jewish presence from ancient times until today. This week we read: “you shall make a pure gold Menorah, you shall make it one piece...” (Ex. 25:31) From this we learn that the word “menorah” means a lampstand of one piece.

In the next verse we read: “six branches emerge from its side, three on one side and three on the other side”. From this it is clear that the Menorah is simply a base to which branches are attached. Furthermore, the actual lamps which hold olive oil and are lit to give off light are separate from the Menorah and the branches.

“You should make seven lamps and place these lamps [on the Menorah] so that light radiates from its front side (“al ever paneha”)” (Ex. 25:37) The Menorah is a stand for the lamps. Most of the commentators understand that the lamps are separate from the Menorah. Hizkuni writes: “there is a special action to make the lamps to teach you that they are vessels in themselves, and were separate and removable from the branches of the Menorah”. The lamp is a vessel to hold oil and a wick, and it is placed on the Menorah.

There is a dispute among the commentators about the words “light radiates from its front side” (“al ever paneha”). In which direction does the light of the Menorah shine? The Menorah is placed: “...opposite the Table on the south side of the Tabernacle and the Table is placed on the north side” (Ex. 26:35) Rashbam thinks “that all of the seven lamps shine toward the side of the Table which is opposite [the Menorah’s front].”

In Numbers 8:2-3 we read: “Speak unto Aaron saying ‘when you place the lamps opposite the Menorah the seven lamps will shine’...” From this verse the Midrash Halakha understands that the lamps must shine toward the Menorah itself, i.e. towards the center, the lampstand in the middle. The wicks in each of the three lamps on each side are not in the center of the lamp, but off to the side closest to the center so that the light radiates toward the middle lamp, the lamp which is placed on the Menorah (**Sifrei, Bamidbar, be-haalotekha 1; cf. Menahot 98b and Megillah 21b**)

We can conclude, from this, that there are two approaches as to how the light of belief and Judaism should be projected. One approach is that all of the light should be projected outwardly. According to this approach, the function of religion is to impose itself on the world directly, with no shading or demurrer. But, the other approach is that the light of religion should turn inwardly, to illuminate its own soul first. The projection of the light is only from the center, which draws light from all sides. There are different approaches in religion from the left and right, objections and a broad spectrum of views. The proper projection is the middle way, enlightened

and not domineering. As the Midrash Halakha says in the end: “from this R. Nathan said, the middle way is honorable”(in Megillah R. Yohanan). **TTT 113 T and M**

One other aspect, that I find fascinating, is the development of the space and the vessels which are specified for the Tabernacle when Solomon comes to build the Temple. This contrast is important, and thus the Haftarah for Terumah is chosen from that context from the book of Kings. But, in Chronicles we are given even more details, and some of those details are strikingly different from what we would expect based upon the Torah’s description of vessels in the Holy space (cf. II Chron. 4 ff.).

This is a subject of discussion in the Talmud. The rabbis wonder why Solomon made 10 Tables and 10 Menorahs!? (**Menahot 98b**) This would mean that some of them would not be in the proper place! In both cases the Talmud gives the answer “That (Menorah/Table) of Moses is in the middle (that is, in the place the Torah specifies) and Solomon put five to its right and five to its left”. The Talmud is sure that the law as specified in the Torah is kept, and the vessel is in its proper place. Solomon wished to add to the custom, not replace it.

There is such a proliferation of customs surrounding every halakha of the Torah. If those customs preserve the intent of the original and merely add to it, then they are acceptable. However, many times the added customs detract or even contradict the intention of the Torah’s law. We must be aware of this difference and guard to make sure that, like Solomon, we stay within the boundaries of adding beauty and meaning. **TTT 113 HA**

**\*Ex. 26:1**

*As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen (“shesh mashzar”), of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with a design of cherubim worked into them.*

The detailed and extended plans of the Mishkan include not only the Tent and its parts, but also the vessels used in the tent and in the sacrificial worship, and the clothing and special vestments worn by the priests during their service in the Tabernacle.

One of the many details relating to these instructions is the kind of cloth and materiel to be used in making the Tabernacle and the garments for the priests. One word which recurs over and over in both of these sections is the Hebrew word “shesh”. This is a word used to describe the materiel out of which the Tabernacle is made. Indeed, in our parasha we read: “As for the tabernacle, make it of ten strips of cloth; make these of fine twisted linen (“shesh mashzar”), of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, with a design of cherubim worked into them” (Ex. 26:1) These “ten strips of cloth” are what is called the Mishkan, according to Ramban (on Ex. 39:33). That is, they are the essential part of the Mishkan, even though they are merely the outside covering of the whole. In the continuation of chapter 26 we learn that when the 10 strips are fastened together we have thus created “the mishkan” (vs. 6).

**Rashi (on Ex. 26:1)** tries to explain the exact meaning of the words “shesh mashzar”. The Hebrew word “mashzar” means “twisted”, that is strands of cloth woven together into a stronger thread. It is well known that a thread is strengthened by increasing the number of strands woven together to create the thread. Rashi states



that there are four different types of threads in every strand, one of linen and three of wool, and every thread is made up of 6 such strands woven together, that is altogether 24 strands. The word "shesh" thus means, according to Rashi, "six", that is, a thread woven of six strands (each single strand being woven of four). Still, one of the anomalies of this description is that the strands are woven of linen and wool, a combination which is not considered to be pure. Indeed, the Torah forbids one from wearing clothing made of this combination (Deut. 22:11).

In the Talmud we find another approach to the question of the meaning of "shesh". This is in the discussion in relationship to the priests clothing. The Mishna tells us that the priest would go into the Holy of Holies to perform a sacrifice, "then he went down, immersed himself, came up and dried himself. They would then bring to him his own garments, he put them on. They would accompany him to his house. He would arrange for a day of festivity for his friends whenever he had come forth from the sanctuary in peace." (**Yoma 70a**)

Later the Talmud asks about the priestly garments and the first suggestion is that "shesh" means linen. This identification is questioned, and it is asked perhaps "shesh" means wool. In the end Ravina shows that linen is the materiel in question because of the verse in Ezekiel: "They shall have linen turbans on their heads and linen breeches on their loins; they shall not gird themselves with anything that causes sweat." (44:18) That is, Ezekiel states specifically that the garments are made of linen. At this point, the Talmudic discussion asks a most amazing question: was this the way the verse was understood before Ezekiel came along? This is almost a classic question of historical Judaism, which can conceive of change in halakha according to historical context. **TTT 114 HA**

Indeed, R. Hisda is then quoted as saying that there are halakhot which we learn from Ezekiel and NOT from the Torah, such as the halakha that "No alien, uncircumcised in heart and uncircumcised in flesh, shall enter into My sanctuary." (Ezek. 44:9) That is, no priest who is uncircumcised physically, in flesh, or who is uncircumcised spiritually, by being an immoral person, may serve in the sanctuary. (The idea is that a priest who is not circumcised because, for example, his brothers died of circumcision is not allowed to function as a priest.)

The statement of R. Hisda is subjected to the same question: how was this notion understood before Ezekiel? That is, is it true that before Ezekiel there was no such halakha? That is, before Ezekiel could corrupt priests function with impunity? The answer in the Talmud is that this notion WAS known before Ezekiel, and was the accepted custom before the prophet, but he attached it to a verse. That is, THE PROPHET CREATED A VERSE SO THERE WOULD BE A SCRIPTURAL REFERENCE TO THE EXISTING CUSTOM. This is a bold statement both about the development of halakha, and about the religious creativity of the prophet.

Indeed, we can almost reconstruct the thought process of the prophet. He might have reasoned something like: "The question of allowing an immoral priest to serve God in the name of all of Israel cannot be allowed to remain merely a custom. It must be 'codified' in some textual expression, in an explicit halakha." The Talmud implies that this same procedure applies to the fixing of the halakha that the priests' clothes be of linen. **TTT 114 HA**

The Mishnah, above, tells us that the priest made a party for his friends if emerging unharmed. This is in proximity to his changing of garments. I connect this with the halakha of Ezekiel, namely that unworthy priests should not serve at the altar. I do this because of the story told there (**Yoma 71b**) of a High Priest who left the Temple to make such a party for his friends, and a large crowd followed him. But, when the crowd spotted Shemaiah and Avtalyon, they began to walk after them! When they came to take leave of the High Priest, he said to them: “May the descendants of the heathen come in peace!” The priest was referring to the fact that Shemaiah and Avtalyon were descendants of non-Jews, of converts. (according to one tradition they were descendants of Sennacherib! (**Git. 57b**)). The priest thus revealed his unsuitability for his position since he had scoffed at these sages and revealed his jealousy at the honor which the people had bestowed upon them.

Shemaiah and Avtalyon replied to the priest: “May the descendants of the heathen, who do the work of Aaron, arrive in peace, but the descendant of Aaron, who does not do the work of Aaron, he shall not come in peace”. The halakhot formulated by Ezekiel, namely that the priests garments be of linen, and that an unworthy priest not be allowed to serve God, are thus connected. For putting on the garments of service implies moral worthiness. In a sense, if the priest is unworthy, the garment does not “fit”. The descendants of converts who have become masters of the Law, teachers of Judaism, do the work of bringing the people closer to God, and they are more worthy of the heritage of Aaron than those physically descended from him, but who scoff at the people. **TTT 114 HA and M and B**

**\*Ex. 26, 26 - 28**

<sup>26</sup>You shall make bars of acacia wood: five for the planks of the one side wall of the Tabernacle, <sup>27</sup>five bars for the planks of the other side wall of the Tabernacle, and five bars for the planks of the wall of the Tabernacle at the rear to the west. <sup>28</sup>The center bar halfway up the planks shall run from end to end.

The seemingly superfluous detail about the Mishkan and its implements became a source of rich and varied interpretation in Midrashic literature. We can use this to teach some of the basic principles of Jewish sources.

For example, the three sides of the Mishkan are made of slabs of acacia wood, each slab set into a kind of bronze base. The slabs are held together by rods of acacia wood which connect each side of slabs together, and “a middle rod in the midst of the slabs, running from one end to the other end”. (Ex. 26:26-28) While this description seems to be simple enough, when you actually try to visualize it or sketch it out on paper, you soon see that it is not at all clear how the fitting together of the slabs of wood is to work.

Indeed, there is a dispute about it in the Talmud between R. Nehemiah and R. Judah (**Shabbat 98a-b**). So, the first thing to notice about our tradition is that there is never only one way of understanding verses. Even in a matter as seemingly simple and practical as building plans. R. Judah understands that the shape of the slabs is such that at the corners, special slabs had to be shaped to fill in “empty space”. R. Nehemiah understands that the slabs are shaped as squares, and thus there is a need

for two extra slabs at the corners. What is important from this debate is the debate itself. **TTT 115 HA and P**

As for the “middle rod in the midst of the slabs, running from one end to the other end” (v. 28), they conceive that each slab has a hole drilled into its midst, and this rod runs through the middle of all the slabs, and thus it is the firmest support. Indeed, the Talmud remarks on this that the Mishkan stood by virtue of a miracle. Rashi explains that they take the verse to mean that ONE ROD runs through all three sides from “one end to the other end”. The miracle is that this straight rod, manages to bend itself around the corners. Perhaps, we can understand this idea in terms of how there is always room for miracles. Sometimes it seems as if nature’s laws are not strictly applied. There is hope, even in the face of a seemingly insurmountable obstacle.

Another approach is found in the Midrash in **Numbers Rabbah (18:14)**, in which this central rod is interpreted metaphorically. There the Midrash interprets the rod as a symbol for Moses and Aaron, “just as this rod does not move, so Moses”. Here the method of interpretation is to see the central rod as the stable one, the one upon which the Mishkan stands, and because it runs through the midst of the slabs it does not move, and provides the kinetic stability for all of the slabs to stay together. The Midrash applies those qualities to Moses and Aaron. Spiritual leaders provide a cohesion for the group, and enable it to stand together, by being straight and in their midst.

**\*Ex. 26, 33**

*Hang the curtain under the clasps, and carry the Ark of the Pact there, behind the curtain, so that the curtain shall serve you as a partition between the Holy and the Holy of Holies*

Each detail of the Mishkan and the implements presents an opportunity for Rabbinic tradition to learn new lessons about worship, spirituality, ethics and holiness.

For example, we read about the curtain ("parochet") which will serve as a divider between the Holy and the Holy of holies: "Hang the curtain under the clasps, and carry the Ark of the Pact there, behind the curtain, so that the curtain shall serve you as a partition between the Holy and the Holy of Holies." (Ex. 26:33) Now, at first glance this seems very simple. The Ark must be separated, somehow, from the other parts. It is in the Holy of Holies, and the space in front of it is merely Holy.

But, upon a little reflection we begin to wonder about the very idea of degrees of holiness within the Mishkan. That is, what is holiest, in a sense projects outward. The "purity" or the "strength" of the holiness seems to diminish the further away from the source one gets. The source is the Holy Ark, which contains both sets of the Tablets. It is the symbol, both in its outer form (i.e. the Keruvim), and in its inner contents, of the direct connection between man and God. It is the point of communication between them, and thus is the Holy of Holies. It is from this spot that all other holiness radiates.

One problem raised with this description is that in Ex. 40, 10, the Altar is also called the Holy of Holies ("kodesh kodashim")! **Ramban** suggests that this cannot mean that it is the source of holiness, since that role is reserved for the Ark. But, he

suggests that the Altar can impart holiness to those who come in contact with it ("the altar shall become most holy ("kodesh kodashim"); whatever touches the altar shall become consecrated", Ex. 29, 37) Although the altar itself receives its holiness from the Holy of Holies, one who contacts it, partakes in it directly, becomes sanctified. So, the source of holiness can be spread around, and people can become influenced by it, if they partake of it directly.

How does this work? The phrase "Holy of holies" ("kodesh ha-kodashim") appears in another verse relating to the place where the priests eat their portion of the sacrifices (Num. 18,10). Again, Ramban, points out that this cannot mean the place of the Ark, for there is no eating or drinking allowed in that place. But, in this case he interprets it to mean that the priests, who have come to partake of holiness, must eat it in a state of purity and holiness. The explication there shows that this state is the state of moral purity and honesty. Thus, holiness is a state which includes those qualities of moral integrity. One cannot claim to actually partake of the holiness, even if one has come into contact with it in a formal manner, i. e. by touching the altar, UNLESS one performs their actions with virtuousness, justice, equity and righteousness. **TTT 115 M and B**

Until this point we have an interesting picture of holiness emanating from the Ark (Torah and Revelation) through the altar (worship) and being encapsulated in deeds (the sacrificial meal and justice). A human can experience the holy, but this is conditional on that person being ethical and honest at the time of the experience.

If that is the case, what is the purpose of the curtain? It seems as if the Torah thinks that the source of holiness should not be exposed, access to it needs to involve approaching it indirectly. Even when it is mandated that a person enter the Holy of Holies, the High Priest on Yom Kippur, the entrance should not be easy or direct. However, the image of how we access Holiness is more complex than merely opening a curtain and being there. Indeed there is a controversy over this issue in the Mishnah: "he went through the heichal until he came to the place between the two curtains which separated the holy from the holy of holies, and between which there was [a space of] one cubit. R. Jose said: there was but one curtain, as it is said: "so that the curtain shall serve you as a partition between the Holy and the Holy of Holies" (**Yoma 5:1; Talmud 51b**).

The Mishnah assumes that there were two curtains with a space between them, kind of like the old fashioned movie house curtains. R. Jose demurs, saying that the Torah, our verse, only speaks of ONE curtain. In the Talmud there the Amoraim ask: "how did the Rabbis answer R. Jose?" The response is that "... [one curtain] applied at the Mishkan, but in the Second Temple, because there was lacking the partition wall which had been in the first Temple — and the Sages were doubtful as to whether its sacredness partook of the character of the Holy or the Holy of Holies, they made two curtains." The Gemara assumes that there were THREE different methods of separating off the Holy of Holies. It admits that the Sages instituted their OWN understanding of it, even though the Torah text seems plain and clear! **TTT 115 HA and P**

In the Mishkan there was one curtain, in the first Temple there was a curtain and a wall, and in the second Temple there were the two curtains as described in the

Mishnah (cf. **Rambam, Bet ha-Behirah 4:2**). The images that these methods bring to mind are fascinating. To my mind they describe different attempts to grapple with the question of the accessibility of Holiness. Given that Holiness is "other", what is the best way to acknowledge the separate nature of Holiness and still make it accessible? The single curtain is not particularly inviting, the wall of the First Temple even less so. The wall bespeaks alienation. The solution of the Sages for the second Temple is brilliant. On the one hand the Ark can be perceived through the amah, the open space, Holiness is not totally "unseen behind the curtain or wall". The hanging of two curtains is more inviting, and gives the message that one can approach. The two curtains also invite one to approach from different directions (cf. the Mishnah there), and signals that there are different ways to get to Holiness. **TTT 115 HA and P**

The sages knew that we need to be invited and encouraged to experience Holiness. They knew that it could only be truly experienced out of morality and honesty. They knew that it was open to access from different directions. They knew that one could never be certain about the nature of the holiness perceived. So, they instituted the two curtain solution. Their understanding should guide us today.

**\*Ex. 26, 35**

<sup>35</sup>*Place the table outside the curtain, and the lampstand by the south wall of the Tabernacle opposite the table, which is to be placed by the north wall.*

Among the many details concerning the vessels of the Mishkan is their placement within the Mishkan. "You shall place the table outside of the curtain and the lamp opposite the table...." (Ex. 26:35) The Talmud realizes that this placement of the table and the lamp would mean that the altar sticks out in the middle. This means that when a priest starts to enter the sanctuary the first implement that he comes upon is the altar. Now this presents a problem, for Reish Lakish said that "one should never pass up a mitzvah which presents itself." Thus, if the priest is on his way to take care of the lamp, for example, and he happens upon the altar first, shouldn't the priest stop and sacrifice first? Is there any sanctity or special importance to the order of things? Or do we just do the mitzvah as it comes up?

The answer to these questions will reveal deeper attitudes towards the mitzvot. If there is a certain order, and that order is important, that means that the mitzvot include a kind of discipline, and that discipline is an important part of the essence of mitzvah. But, if we just do the first thing that comes up, without conscious effort paid to the order, than maybe mitzvot are merely things of convenience or happenstance. The Talmud here (**Yoma 33a-b**) decides that mitzvot have order, and the order is essential, that is, the discipline of mitzvah is an essential part of mitzvah. This is learned from another statement of Reish Lakish, that it is forbidden to put on the Tefillin of the head before that of the arm. **TTT 116 HA and E**

Since the verse from which we learn Tefillin says specifically "on your arm... between your eyes", Tosafot feels that it is obvious that the arm must come first. So what is the force of Reish Lakish' statement. They interpret it to mean that when one puts the Tefillin away in the bag, they must be careful to place the Tefillin of the head in first, and that of the arm on the top. Otherwise, one might be in a situation in which they take out the head Tefillin first from the bag, and thus be tempted to do that mitzvah

first, not in the right order!! Discipline is an inherent and essential part of the mitzvot.

**\*Ex. 27, 1**

*You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide – the altar is to be square – and three cubits high.*

One of the major implements of the Mishkan is the altar of acacia wood. The altar is described thus: “You shall make the altar of acacia wood, five cubits long and five cubits wide—the altar is to be square—and three cubits high.” (Ex. 27, 1) This verse seems quite simple. It describes an altar (“Mizbeah”) square block of acacia wood (“Atzei Shitim”), three cubits high. What could be more prosaic than this. The function of the altar is to be the place upon which the burnt offering (“olah”) is placed. This implies importance, for this is the sacrifice of atonement.

One Midrash relates to all of these elements (**Tanhuma Trumah, 10**). This Midrash views our altar, the altar of the burnt offering, as ordained by God to Abraham as part of the covenant of the pieces (Gen. 15), which is the archetypal covenant of God and Israel. We are all aware that this covenant is the genesis of the promise of the land of Israel and the promise of the continuity of the nation of Israel. But, our Midrash adds a surprising element. It is also the genesis of the potential for atonement. God tells Abraham to take certain animals and sacrifice them, and our Midrash understands that this is saying that when Abraham’s descendants sin, their atonement will be through the medium of sacrifice. Thus, the tabernacle must include an altar (“mizbeah”) for the “olah”.

This idea is fascinating. The covenant includes not only promises by God to Israel, but it includes an awareness that Israel may do things which make it unworthy. So, a method for dealing with such misdeeds is included in the covenant. Our Midrash continues, and extrapolates the meaning of the altar, the “mizbeah”, by describing the word as a notarikon, a series of the first letters of words which itself makes a word. The very idea of notarikon expands language in such a way that simple words can signify complex systems of values far beyond their own letters.

Our Midrash asserts that the word “mizbeah” comes to be in this way: “mem” is “mehila” (“forgiveness”); “zayin” is “zechut” (“virtue”); “bet” is “berakhah” (“blessing”); and “het” is “hayyim” (“life”). Thus, the word altar signifies a system of values which are achieved in acts of true repentance and absolution. But, the Midrash continues to develop the idea by connecting the name of the sacrifice “olah” with its Hebrew root which means to rise up, to ascend. When we act out these values, we are elevated. Spiritual elevation is achieved when we forgive, are virtuous, bring blessings to others, and support life. **TTT 117 M and K**

The Midrash continues to ask why is this altar made of wood. It is because of the merit of Abraham, who gave shelter under trees to his visitors (Gen. 18). If we wondered how the qualities of “mizbeah” can be lived out, if we searched for an example, the Midrash helps. It is Abraham’s talking in dusty and weary travelers giving them food and drink and shady rest.

But, it is not merely “wood”, but acacia wood. Why the “Shittim”? The Midrash opines that it is connected to the Hebrew word “shtut”, foolishness. In our tradition,

transgression always has an element of foolishness in it. Since the Israelites were foolish by making the golden calf, God provides a remedy, the potential for atonement and expiation through the altar of acacia wood, wood whose name sounds like "foolishness". Not only that, but our Midrash creates another notarikon for "shittim". "Shin" is "shalom", peace; "tet" is "tovah", goodness, "yod" is "yeshua", salvation or deliverance; and "mem" is "mehila", forgiveness. So, the altar ("mizbeah") of acacia ("shittim") creates the progression: forgiveness, virtue, blessing, life, peace, goodness, salvation, and forgiveness. We begin and end the progression with the same value, to show how central forgiveness is in being able to achieve the values that make up the middle of the progression.

The basis of the altar is Torah, and our Midrash explains that it is 5 amot by 5 amot in dimension, because the ten commandments were given 5 on each tablet. The width and length of the altar graphically reminds us of the ten commandments and Mt. Sinai. What is left of our verse to explain? Only the height of the altar, 3 amot. Our Midrash leaves no detail of the verse unexplained. We learn from the height that we must thank God for his salvation of Israel in history. God sent three great leaders to take Israel out of Egypt, thus keeping his part of the covenant with Abraham. God did it by inspiring human leaders to implement the promises made to Abraham. They are Moses, Aaron and Miriam, as we are told by the prophet Micah (6, 4). Now that we have interpreted every phrase and word of the verse, we understand the connection of the ritual implement of the altar as a connection through history to God's covenant with Israel, a concrete reminder of Israel's responsibility to act so as to fulfill its part of the covenant, and of the values which Israel needs to make manifest in the world so that the covenant will be fulfilled.

**\*Ex. 27, 17 and 19**

*All the posts round the enclosure shall be banded ("mehushakim") with silver and their hooks shall be of silver; their sockets shall be of copper... all the utensils of the Tabernacle, for all its service, as well as all its pegs and all the pegs of the court, shall be of copper.*

With a joyous heart on the birth of our first granddaughter, Meirav Sarah bat Ariella ve-Menashe BarTuv.

Each element of the structure of the enclosure of the Mishkan is spelled out, and each element of the utensils needed for the offering of sacrifices and the sacred rituals is spelled out. The Tabernacle was a structure that had posts that stood vertically and skins were stretched between them to make an enclosure. The end of the parasha specifies that: "All the posts round the enclosure shall be banded ("mehushakim") with silver and their hooks shall be of silver; their sockets shall be of copper... all the utensils of the Tabernacle, for all its service, as well as all its pegs and all the pegs of the court, shall be of copper." (Ex. 27, 17 and 19)

Three metals are mentioned by name as being used in the construction of the Tabernacle, gold, silver and copper. Gold is reserved for the most important elements, the ones that are associated with God's actual presence, such as the cherubim. The posts and external parts use silver and copper. The posts are "banded ("mehushakim")" together with silver. The idea being that posts are bound together by silver strips. The Hebrew term, "mehushakim", is based upon the root "hshk". The midrashic commentary Sekhel Tov, of R. Menahem b. Solomon, refers to the speech

of Hamor to Jacob when he tries to convince him to let his son, Shechem, marry Dinah. Shechem had raped Dinah, but he wanted to marry her. (cf. Gen 34)

In his speech Hamor uses the word "hshk" to refer to his son's affection and longing for Dinah. R. Menahem notes that the word there denotes affection and acquisition, two things bound together as one. This is precisely the use in our verse, he says, to indicate that the two posts are united as one. He goes on to say that the words of the speech also seem directed at Leah in an attempt to persuade her to give her blessing to the marriage, and he also finds a hint at surprise and embarrassment at what his son had done. What is remarkable in this comment is that it imparts a human face to Hamor, and even suggests that it might not have been a bad match after all. The key is the word "hashak", which implies a genuine desire to create a bond of marriage. **(Sekhel Tov on Gen. 34, 8) TTT P and S**

The word "heshek" describes bonding and it describes desire and affection. **R. Yaakov b. Hananel Sikili** (13-14<sup>th</sup> cent.) writes on the verse: "The designs in a man's mind are deep waters, But a man of understanding can draw them out". (Prov. 20, 5) He explains that there is wisdom in each person, but it is there in potential. In order to draw it out into actual wisdom one needs to study and apply one's mind to the subjects of study. Study requires effort and enterprise. The upshot of this effort is wisdom, and this causes a person's soul to be bound to the source of wisdom, God. This is expressed in the verse: "Because he is devoted ("hashak") to Me I will deliver him; I will keep him safe, for he knows My name." (Ps. 91, 14) The word also includes devotion as well as unity.

The metal which is used as the symbol of devotion and unity is silver, whereas copper is used as the base and the metal of the utensils. Indeed, the last verse of our parasha notes that "all the utensils" are to be made of copper. Now, what utensils are referred to in this verse? Many utensils were spelled out in the previous chapters. Rashi, following the midrashic tradition, notes that there are utensils that were made and used in the erection of the Tabernacle etc. which were not specified by the Torah, such as hammers to drive the stakes, and those also had to be made of copper. **(Rashi on Ex. 27, 19)**

Ramban tries to identify these tools that are part of the Tabernacle and necessary for its erection and functioning, and yet are not spelled out in the Torah. He says that they are the oil vessels referred to in Num. 4, 9. He adds: "the people made them on their own, perhaps Bezalel did not make them, but individuals made them and bequeathed them to the public service." **(Ramban on Ex. 25, 39)**

These tools are necessary for the service to take place, they are an important part of what makes it possible for the Tabernacle to exist. Yet, they are not commanded in detail by God, they are the free will offering of people who are moved to be creative and make something that will help with erecting the Tabernacle. Anyone can do it. And they are to have the same status as those vessels made by Bezalel at God's commands, and they are to look the same.

This is a remarkable addition to our understanding of the symbolic meanings of the Tabernacle. In addition to the idea that it must express the notion of unity, affection and devotion in the way that the posts are bound one to another, the vessels used



express the idea that all can contribute to the Divine service, and all contributions are worthy and respected just as are those wrought out of God's commands. TTT **P and S**

**\*Ex. 27, 20 - 21**

<sup>20</sup>You shall further instruct the Israelites to bring you clear oil of beaten olives for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly. <sup>21</sup>Aaron and his sons shall set them up in the Tent of Meeting, outside the curtain which is over [the Ark of] the Pact, [to burn] from evening to morning before the LORD. It shall be a due from the Israelites for all time, throughout the ages.

The parasha starts off with the command to bring pure olive oil for light (la-maor). The verse ends: "to raise an eternal light" (le-haalot ner tamid). "Eternal light" is the usual translation of the phrase "ner tamid". However, Rashi gives two explanations of this phrase, neither of which matches the translation "eternal".

Rashi's first explanation deals with the verb "le-haalot". He is obviously troubled by the use of this verb to mean "light" or "kindle". This verb usually refers to raising something up. So Rashi explains that the phrase means: "to ignite in such a way that the flame can burn by itself". So the first characteristic of the ner tamid is that we only begin the flame, but we must do it in such a way that the flame can continue to burn by itself.

Rashi's second comment has to do with the word "tamid". In what sense is a flame "eternal"? Rashi is bothered by the combination of the word "tamid" which usually means "forever" and the "candle", which always has a fixed amount of time to burn. Thus, Rashi interprets the word "tamid" to mean: "[the lamp is lit] every single night and this is what is meant by 'tamid'". He gives the example of the phrase "olat tamid" (Num. 28:6), which means a daily sacrifice. Rashi understands the word "tamid" not to mean eternal, in the sense of at all times, but rather it means "consistent". Thus, the second characteristic of the ner tamid is that of consistency, something that is always done.

The ner tamid is situated between the aron kodesh and the worshippers. It represents the spirit of the Torah, the light of God's word which radiates out from the aron kodesh. It is always visible, even when the physical sefer Torah is hidden by the parochet. The two characteristics of the ner tamid are crucial in understanding the spirit of the Torah. One is to make each Jew self-sufficient, give them Jewish learning and experience so that they can continue by themselves. The second characteristic stresses that it is by consistency, by constant repetition of custom and learning that the ability to be self-sufficient in spirit is achieved. We cannot be embarrassed by repetition and the need for discipline in study and mitzvot, these are the main need to develop a lamp which can give off light by itself. **TTT 119 E**

The classic characterization of theological minutiae is to answer the question "how many angels can dance on the head of a pin"? I understand that this is actually a satire on inane theological debates. This week I want to ask how many important principles of value can result from one verse? The answer here, as in the case of the angels, is an infinite number. But, being practical people, let's just take one small sampling.

Our parasha opens with the very famous command concerning the olive oil needed to kindle the lamps of the tabernacle. The JPS translation reads: "You shall further

instruct the Israelites ["ve-atah tetzaveh et bnei Yisrael"] to bring you ["va-yikhu eilekhah"] clear oil of beaten olives ["shemen zayit zakh katit"] for lighting, for kindling lamps regularly." (Ex. 27, 20) The translation smoothes over the difficulty of the Hebrew words, and in so doing dulls some of the opportunities for interpretation.

The phrase from which we get the name of our parasha, is intriguing. The word "tetzaveh" means you will command. The nuance is one who promulgates "mitzvot". In most of the Torah Moses instructs Israel ("diber" means instruct, cf. Ex. 34, 28 et al "aseret ha-devarim" the ten instructions) or speaks to Israel ("amar"). It is rare that Moses is told to "command" Israel. When Moses commands does that mean that Moses is considered the author of the commandment? This is a difficult reading because the content of the mitzvah is spoken in God's name. So, what does it mean for Moses to command what God has already commanded?

One Midrash answers this question by assuming that Moses commands the human procedure which accompanies the commandment. It does this by relating to another problematic phrase in our verse "va-yikhu eilekhah". This literally means they shall take to you. We would expect "va-yaveeu", they shall bring to you. The Hebrew word denotes taking to oneself, but here it is in the plural, clearly signifying the nation. This Midrash notes that this phrase occurs three times in the Torah, twice in connection with the pure olive oil for the Menorah and once in connection with the red cow. The common denominator is that just as in the case of the red cow the command is for Moses, and Aaron, to act as treasurers of this valuable gift, so in the case of the oil they must act as treasurers, in the sense of oversight. Our Midrash goes further and learns from our verse that the nation of Israel is also involved in the oversight, and that it is for all generations. (**Sifrei Zuta 19, 2**)

What is Moses commanding? Not the substance of the mitzvah, because that is from God. But, Moses commands the responsibility for making sure that these valuable items are brought and administered justly and righteously. Indeed, this Midrash has the administration of righteousness fall equally into the hands of the prophet, Moses, the priest, Aaron, and the leaders of the nation! The important principle here is that mitzvot cannot be merely performed, but since they involve contributions from the public and expenditures etc., there must be oversight and responsibility towards those who give.

Another context where Moses commands Israel is that of bringing sacrifices for the festivals. (Num. 28, 2) One Midrash is very puzzled by the very idea of people bringing things to God. Is God not omnipotent, and thus above all needs? This is how they interpret Job 36, 22. Yet, says this Midrash, in Job 37, 23 it seems as if God is not omnipotent (the Midrash reads this verse not as a rhetorical question but as a statement). So, is God all powerful or not? This Midrash enunciates what is an extremely important principle of education in answering this conundrum. "When He (God) gives to them, He gives according to his infinite ability, but when He (God) demands from them, he demands according to their ability." (**Num. R. 21, 22**)

The Midrash gives an example. God demands of Israel to bring pure olive oil to light the lamps, but, when God gives light to Israel it is a miraculous light that goes before them in the darkness of the desert. Another example in this Midrash is that God

demands of them according to their ability to bring the fruit of a goodly tree on Sukkot (Lev. 23, 40). God, on the other hand, gives to Israel great and mighty trees, even in the desert (Isa. 41, 19) Educators and parents need to internalize this principle. **TTT 119 E**

Another Midrash is puzzled by the fact that every time Moses instructs, or talks or commands it is always to "the people of Israel". God, says this Midrash, created 70 nations, 70 ethnicities ("etnitiyot"), so why is Moses told by God to only relate to Israel? This Midrash presents the answer in the form of parables. The first parable is in the name of R. Avin, and it is about a king who tells his dresser to take particular care in folding and treating one of his cloaks. The dresser asks the king why, out of all of his many cloaks, he is so careful about this one? The king answers that this is the cloak he wore at the moment of his coronation. So, when Moses asks God why, out of all the 70 nations, he is asked to command only Israel; God answers that Israel accepted Him as king at the Red Sea, saying "God will rule forever and ever" (Ex. 15, 18). (**Pesikta d'rav Kahana 2, 7**) Israel is the special cloak, and the mitzvot is special attention paid to them. Here, Israel chooses to make God its king forever. It is the recognition of God as king by choice that creates the special relationship of covenant. It is because of the special relationship of covenant that Moses is particularly to address Israel. **TTT 119 U**

In this same Midrash a parallel parable is cited in the name of R. Berekhiah. In this parable there is a sage who has many frocks, and he tells his servant to be particularly careful with it. When asked why he says because he wore that frock on the day he was appointed to the Sanhedrin. Here Israel's special relationship is from Sinai, when God was accepted as the Rabbi par excellence.

It seems to me that the first parable has more force in explaining the special covenantal relationship with God. The first parable is connected with the sea and the song of the sea, because there is no tradition that the song was forced. In rabbinic tradition Sinai might be construed as a forced covenant (cf. **AZ 2b et al**), whereas there is no tradition that the song of the sea was forced. It is portrayed as a free-will offering of song to God. In this Midrash, Moses' commanding of Israel in the case of the olive oil is an example of the partnership forged out of the covenantal relation which is based on free choice. Here the principle is one of the religious meaning of covenant. Mutual responsibility and a strong sense of identity come out of freely acknowledged relationship.

Finally, and there are many more, one Midrash asks why the phrase "clear oil of beaten olives ["shemen zayit zakh katit"]" is used here for the lights of the Menorah, whereas regarding the grain offerings the Torah just specifies "oil"? (e.g. Lev. 7, 10 et al) Why is the oil for the Menorah to be so pure and special, and for the grain offering, which is also holy and brought to the altar, plain old olive oil is sufficient? (**Tanhuma, Tetzaveh 3**) The answer given at the end is that the grain offering is meant to be eaten by the priest and the one who brought the offering. But, the light of the Menorah was for all who came into the Temple, and not only that but, "all of the courtyards of Jerusalem were illuminated by taking fire from the Menorah, and they all enjoyed the light of the Menorah, as is written: "to take to you ["va-yikhu eilekhah"] clear oil of beaten olives".

The principle here is that what is shared with all needs to be pure and of the best. This Midrash understands that the Torah used the word "va-yikhu", because the light was taken to all of the courtyards of Jerusalem. What a beautiful image of how the light of the Menorah, and presumably its metaphorical image Torah, needs to be brought to every home, and needs to be the best quality possible so that it will be able to be shared with all. TTT 119 M

**\*Ex. 28:6-12**

*They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked into designs. It shall have two shoulder-pieces attached; they shall be attached at its two ends. And the decorated band that is upon it shall be made like it, of one piece with it: of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. Then take two lazuli stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel: six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. On the two stones you shall make seal engravings – the work of a lapidary – of the names of the sons of Israel. Having bordered them with frames of gold, attach the two stones to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people, whose names Aaron shall carry upon his two shoulder-pieces for remembrance before the LORD.*

Many times we discover that what seems to be a simple sentence becomes very complicated. Language can seem clear, but much is hidden. The glory of our heritage of Midrash and interpretation is the revelation of complexity in the seemingly simple. This week we read of the High Priest's ephod, one of the special garments worn while performing the service of Israel before God. "They shall make the ephod of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, worked into designs. It shall have two shoulder-pieces attached; they shall be attached at its two ends. And the decorated band that is upon it shall be made like it, of one piece with it: of gold, of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen. Then take two lazuli stones and engrave on them the names of the sons of Israel: six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. On the two stones you shall make seal engravings – the work of a lapidary – of the names of the sons of Israel. Having bordered them with frames of gold, attach the two stones to the shoulder-pieces of the ephod, as stones for remembrance of the Israelite people, whose names Aaron shall carry upon his two shoulder-pieces for remembrance before the LORD." (Ex. 28:6-12, JPS translation)

It is clear from this passage that the two stones on the ephod are very important. They symbolize the fact that the High Priest IS all of Israel, that he carries with him, literally, the tribes when he comes before God. Thus, how the names appear on the stones is no trivial matter.

The ephod is distinguished by two stones upon which are engraved the names of the tribes of Israel. The JPS translation of verse 10 smoothes over one of the great debates in Rabbinic literature "six of their names on the one stone, and the names of the remaining six on the other stone, in the order of their birth. ("ke-toldotam")" While it is true that the simple meaning of the word "ke-toldotam" is "the order of birth", it also can have OTHER meanings. Our tradition struggled with how to understand this word. In what order to write the names of the tribes? Which tribes are we talking about, those born to Jacob, or those to whom the land of Israel was divided? There

are at least FOUR approaches to this question (other approaches I consider merely variations of these four). **TTT 120 H and P**

The first approach is, as the JPS translation, according to the story of the birth of the sons of Jacob (cf. Gen. 29-30, and 35). This is **Rashi's** approach, and it is based not only on the simple meaning of "ke-toldotam", but also on another factor which the Talmud mentions, namely that the two stones have engraved on them a total of 50 letters, 25 on each stone. Thus, Rashi points out that this can occur if we follow the order of birth as in Genesis, but only if we write Benjamin in full, that is with two "yoddim", as the name appears in his birth verse (**Gen. 35:18**) The stones would look like this:

Reuven	Gad
Simon	Asher
Levi	Issachar
Judah	Zevulun
Dan	Joseph
Naftali	Benjamin

The message of this order is the historical remembrance of God's mercy to Jacob, and also it prevents conflict between the tribes. There is no "favoritism" in this order, merely the way nature worked.

In the Talmud there are two other approaches (**Sotah 36a-b**). The first is that of R. Kahana, who thinks that the names appear AS THEY DO AT THE COVENANT OF ERETZ ISRAEL, namely according to the 6 tribes who stood on Mt. Grezim and the 6 who stood on Mt. Ebal (cf. Deut. 27:12-13; cf. Josh. 8:30-35). In this case the stones would look like this:

Simon	Reuven
Levi	Gad
Judah	Asher
Issachar	Zevulun
Joseph	Dan
Benjamin	Naftali

Here the division is by deeds. Those who have been more loyal to the covenant are on one side and those who have been less loyal on the other. R. Kahana apparently understands the word "ke-toldotam" in the sense of "according to the history of their deeds". But, he also adds complexity to the symbolism of what the priest carries with him. There is a reminder of covenant in this order, of the Land of Israel, and of the fact that the covenant with God includes CHOICE. Israel must choose to be loyal, and is aware of the consequences of their choices. All of Israel stands with the priest before God, even those who need forgiveness for wrong choices. Perhaps, the shape of the stones reminds one of the mountains, and there is a specification of division in the Torah itself. **TTT 120 P and K**

The third approach (second in the Talmud) is that of R. Hanina b. Gamliel. He thinks that the division is according to the way the tribes are ordered when they went down to Egypt, in the very first chapter of Exodus (1:2-5), and that is ACCORDING TO

THE MOTHERS. In Exodus 1, we have the order as follows: the sons of Leah (all 6 on one stone), one son of Rachel, the four sons of the handmaidens, and Joseph, the other son of Rachel. In this case the stones would look like this:

Reuven	Benjamin
Simon	Dan
Levi	Naftali
Judah	Gad
Issachar	Asher
Zevulun	Joseph

Here the word “ke-toldotam” seems to be interpreted as “their collective history”, namely the formative event of going down to Egypt, from which these twelve sons became a nation. This order makes the formative event of exile a constant reminder, and also alludes to God’s salvation in taking them out of Egypt. Perhaps, it also expresses what is a constant theme in Torah, namely the attempt to give status to Leah, for God to support her. In this view, there is an implied favoritism to one side, as half of Israel are all of one mother. This division also stresses the idea that even though the tribes are known by their patriarch, Israel, the matriarchs are an inherent central part of their history, and they are the principle of organization around which the memory of the nation Israel is setup. Furthermore, all of the names ARE GIVEN BY THE MOTHERS. The tribes owe their names to Rachel and Leah (the only exception is Benjamin). **TTT 120 E**

The fourth approach is that of the **Rambam** which is the only attempt at deciding the Halakha as to how to make the ephod! (hilchot kelay ha-mikdash, 9:9). In Rambam’s case the stones would look like this:

Reuven	Simon
Levi	Judah
Issachar	Zevulun
Naftali	Dan
Gad	Asher
Jehoseph (cf. Ps. 81:6)	Benjamin

Rambam accepts the idea that there must be 50 letters, but makes the 50<sup>th</sup> letter the additional “hey” in the name of Joseph (cf. Talmud Sotah). No one knows where Rambam gets this order. Some of his explicators think that this is the order which one can deduce from the discussion in the Talmud Sotah. However, they must stand on their heads to make this point. (cf. Meiri, and Tosafot there). It is a mystery, for it mixes up the tribes in a way which has no clear logic, nor any clear Biblical basis, as do the other approaches. The word “ke-toldotam” is interpreted (as it is in one of the comments in Sotah there) as “as they were called when born”. That is, the names are the names given in the days of Jacob, and not as Moses called them latter on, e.g. “ha-Dani”, nor in some other configuration, such as Menasseh and Ephraim in place of Joseph etc.

The ephod symbolizes all of Israel, but what is in a name, or 12 names?

**\*Ex. 29, 1**

*This is what you shall do to them in consecrating them to serve Me as priests: Take a young bull of the herd and two rams without blemish;*

In parashat Tetzaveh we read of the dedication of the priests, the Cohanim, to serve God. The phrase used is, "to serve Me" (e.g. Ex. 29:1,44 etc.). The title "Cohen" means "servant", and the verb "le-khahen" means "to serve". But, what exactly is the nature of the Cohen's service?

**Metzudat Ziyyon (to Ezek. 44:13)** interprets "le-khahen li" to mean "to serve me by virtue of the altar service". This is the way that we might take the phrase at first glance, namely, that the priests service is by virtue of the handling of the sacrifices. It is "work", i.e. "avodah", which is "service". The word "avodah" in Hebrew has this dual meaning, that is "to perform physical work" and "to serve". When the Cohen slaughters an animal and does all of the hard work associated with preparing the animal for sacrifice and carrying out the sacrifice, that is "service of the Lord".

The concept that ordinary "work" can be made into "holy service" is very crucial to religious sensibility. In that sense the Cohen is merely a paradigm for every person's religious life. Still, in the Mishnah and Talmud there is a fascinating discussion as to the deeper meaning of how "work" becomes "service of God".

"The priests who ministered in the temple of Onias may not minister in the temple in Jerusalem; and needless to say [this is so of priests who ministered to] another matter; for it is written, "nevertheless the priests of the high places came not up to the Altar of the Lord in Jerusalem. But they did eat unleavened bread among their brethren." (2 Kings 23:9) thus they are like those priests that had a blemish: they are entitled to share and eat [of the holy things]. But they are not permitted to offer sacrifices." (**Mishnah Menahot 13:10; Talmud Menahot 109a**).

The Temple of Onias is The Temple erected in the neighborhood of Heliopolis in Egypt by Onias IV. who had fled from Palestine c.164 B.C.E. It was modeled on the Temple in Jerusalem, and the regular system of sacrifices was established there. It was despoiled and suppressed by the Emperor Vespasian about the same time as the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple; v. Josephus Antiquities. XIII, 3ff. The Mishnah makes it clear that a Cohen who had "served" at the temple of Onias could not "serve" in Jerusalem, even though they were allowed to eat Terumah etc.

The Talmud, however, is not satisfied with this statement, and goes into the question of what exactly the "service" in the Onias temple meant. What does a Cohen have to do in that place to be disqualified in Jerusalem. This is a typical Talmudic clarification of a Mishnaic generality. In the talmudic discussion we discover that there were different opinions as to what the "service" of a Cohen is. Indeed, the Talmudic discussion (109a) expands the Mishnah's purview beyond the Temple of Onias, which was Jewish, to "avodat kokhavim", idolatry.

"Rab Judah said, If a priest had slaughtered an animal to an idol, his offering [in the Temple] is acceptable. R. Isaac b. Abdimi said, Where is there Scriptural proof for this? It is written, "Because they ministered unto them before their idols, and became a stumblingblock of iniquity unto the house of Israel; therefore have I lifted up My



hand against them, says the Lord God, and they shall bear their iniquity (Ezek. 44:12) and immediately afterwards it is written, "And they shall not come near unto Me, to minister unto Me in the priest's office." (ibid. 13) Thus only if they performed service [unto idols, and have become a stumblingblock, are they disqualified], but [merely] slaughtering is not [considered] service."

This passage (and the subsequent development in the Talmud) reveal a conception of "service" which is not merely technical. The "work" part of slaughtering an animal is, in itself, not considered "service of God". Thus, even partaking in such "work" to idolatry does not disqualify the Cohen from continuing to serve God afterwards. "Service of the Lord" here must mean something which does not constitute a "stumblingblock" to others. "Service" has to do with intention of serving, faith in the idol and spreading of idolatrous teachings, rather than mere participation in the ritual of worship. "Service of God" is much more than mechanical ritual, and even participation in such mechanics does not automatically disqualify a person from returning to "service of God". If the Cohen hones the sense of "being a servant" of God, then the priest can return to serve God in honesty. **TTT 121 B and M and S**

**\*Ex. 29:5-9**

*Then take the vestments, and clothe Aaron with the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the decorated band of the ephod. Put the headdress on his head, and place the holy diadem upon the headdress. Take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him. Then bring his sons forward; clothe them with tunics and wind turbans upon them. And gird both Aaron and his sons with sashes. And so they shall have priesthood as their right for all time.*

This week we read about the dedication of Aaron and his sons, the priests, to serve God and the people Israel. As part of the dedication ceremony we read about how Aaron and his sons are dressed to accept the priestly office: "Then take the vestments, and clothe Aaron with the tunic, the robe of the ephod, the ephod, and the breastpiece, and gird him with the decorated band of the ephod. Put the headdress on his head, and place the holy diadem upon the headdress. Take the anointing oil and pour it on his head and anoint him. Then bring his sons forward; clothe them with tunics and wind turbans upon them. And gird both Aaron and his sons with sashes. And so they shall have priesthood as their right for all time." (Ex. 29:5-9)

The priestly garments, about whose creation we have read so much in chapter 28, are now put onto those meant to wear them. It is clear that the dressing of Aaron and his sons is a climactic moment in their dedication to the priestly office. The Torah then goes on to tell how sacrifices are to be performed in order to induct the priests by virtue of service at the altar.

In the Talmud the question is raised about the proximity of these two matters. "Why are the sections on sacrifices and the priestly vestments close together?" (**Zevachim 88b**) This question reflects a common Midrashic assumption, namely, that it is significant when two seemingly unrelated matters are in close proximity in the Torah. We are meant to learn some specific lessons about relationships between two matters, which at first glance seem unrelated. **TTT 122 L**

In our case, the answer is quite astonishing: "To teach you: as sacrifices make atonement, so do the priestly vestments make atonement." It is clear how sacrifices make atonement. Firstly, a person who brings the sacrifice confesses a sin. Secondly, the act of giving up something dear to us, that is sacrifice, is also an expression of remorse. Thirdly, the spilling of the blood on the altar symbolizes, according to many commentators, the physical punishment for which the person is liable. All in all, the act is a kind of atonement.

What is it about garments worn by the priest that makes the statement of atonement? Furthermore, it seems as if the sins being atoned for are those of the priest, since only the priest wears the garments! The Talmudic passage goes on to spell out how each garment atones for a specific type of sin. The tunic atones for bloodshed, since Joseph's tunic was dipped in blood (Gen. 37:31). Note that bloodshed here includes the sin of brotherly hatred, and disregard of a brother's predicament. Presumably these sins are more common to priests than actual murder, and so the tunic is a reminder to them to atone for any such sins.

The pants atone for lewdness, and this is clear from what is written there that they are meant to cover the sexual organ. The mitre atones for arrogance, since its form is that of a 'high and mighty' cap. The girdle ("avnet") atones for impure thoughts (of the heart), because it is placed at the level of the heart. The breastplate atones for neglect of civil laws, as is indicated by the phrase "a plate of justice" ("hoshen mishpat", Ex. 28:15).

The ephod atones for idolatry, because the two are linked in Hosea 3:4. That passage in Hosea makes it clear that the idolatry being spoken of is a kind of corruption of the priesthood, a softening of their task to cleave to God in favor of what "pays them" better. The robe atones for slander ("lashon ha-ra"). The robe has bells on the bottom and makes a sound as the priest walks. Since slander is a sin of sound, so the robe's sounds atone for it. Here is a beautiful image of the delicate musical sounds of the bells drowning out the voice speaking slanderous talk about another person. Finally, the headplate atones for brazenness, since the Hebrew phrase for brazenness includes the forehead ("azut metzah"), and the headplate is placed on the forehead. (cf. Ex. 28:38, and Jer. 3:3) **TTT 122 L and M**

All of these sins are sins of immorality, and the priest must be particularly aware of human susceptibility to them because of his position as a servant of the nation before God. It is interesting that the list of sins that this Talmudic passage chooses to illustrate the redemptive qualities of the priestly garments are all sins that have to do with the inner spiritual life of moral qualities. The outer garment somehow must be a true reflection of the inner life. This is a challenge to the priests, and indeed to every person.

#### **\*Ex. 30, 7-8**

*On it Aaron shall burn aromatic incense: he shall burn it every morning ("ba-boker ba-boker") when he tends the lamps ("be-heitivo et ha-nerot"), and Aaron shall burn it at twilight when he lights the lamps ("u-ve-ha'alato") – a regular incense offering ("ketoret tamid") before the Lord throughout the ages."*

The incense altar is part of the ritual which the Priest performs and it is connected to the lighting of the Menorah. In this parashat Tetzaveh we read the following verses: "On it Aaron shall burn aromatic incense: he shall burn it every morning ("ba-boker ba-boker") when he tends the lamps ("be-heitivo et ha-nerot"), and Aaron shall burn it at twilight when he lights the lamps ("u-ve-ha'alato")—a regular incense offering ("ketoret tamid") before the Lord throughout the ages." (Ex. 30, 7-8)

The Hebrew phrases that I have indicated here change this from a seemingly simple set of instructions for the Priest, into a very confusing one. The repetition of the word "ba-boker", in the morning, is confusing. It seems as if Aaron is told to burn the incense in the morning and in the evening, at the times when he is taking care of the lamps of the Menorah. So why is the word "ba-boker" repeated twice? Our translation understands this as emphasis that it is to be every morning. But, is he not intended to burn it every evening? That word is not repeated.

Rashi thinks that the repetition is meant to emphasize that the incense is to be burnt both in the morning and the evening (**Rashi on Ex. 40, 27**). But, then why use the word "boker", morning, to emphasize the evening? Ibn Ezra does not agree, and, like JPS, says that the repetition means every morning. He adds that this is because the Priest is busy cleaning the lamps and preparing new wicks for them, "be-heitivo", not merely lighting them. Perhaps, because of this harder and dirtier work, there is fear that the Priest might forget to burn the incense. Not too convincing in my opinion.

Indeed, the more we delve into this ritual the more problematic the verses become. What is the connection between the lamps of the Menorah and the incense altar? Let us remember that the Menorah is a very large implement, and the seven lamps of it are very large receptacles each one taking a large amount of oil. The Menorah is meant to give light to the Temple, and the incense is meant to give fragrance. This issue is one of the most interesting issues in the Torah. The priests must perform many complex actions when approaching the sacrificial rituals. To light the incense altar, to take care of preparing the lights, that is, cleaning them out, filling them with oil, preparing the wicks and making sure that the lamps are lit is indeed a complex matter.

What is the order? In our verses the Priest first burns the incense and then tends to the lamps, thus, the Talmud suggests, first he finishes with the incense and then takes care of the lamps (**Yoma 14b**). This seems obvious. Yet, our gemara throws out a challenge to this simple reading from the Mishna itself (cf. **Tamid chap. 3**).

The Mishna tells us that duties were allocated to the Priests by drawing lots and the order that is implied in the Mishna is first the lamps and after that the incense! The Talmud discusses this seeming contradiction in the order of the mitzvot. One opinion, that of Abbaye, tries to harmonize the two approaches. Abbaye says that the order is that the priest lights the two western lamps, burns the incense, and then takes care of the other five lamps. So, the Priest follows both orders, he lights some lamps before the incense, and some lamps after the incense. The gemara asks, does this mean that the incense is burned between the lighting of the lamps?! Is one Mitzvah to be interrupted by another Mitzvah before the first one has been completed?!

Indeed, the whole matter of tending to and lighting the lamps is fascinating. It seems, as is natural with oil lamps, that the lamps did not all go out at the same time. Some would burn longer than others. It seems from the Mishna (cf. **Tamid chap. 6**) that the two western lamps would continue to burn after the other five had extinguished. The Mishna tells us from what source of fire the lamps that have been extinguished are to be lighted. Indeed, if they are all extinguished the fire to light the Menorah is taken from the altar. (**Tamid 6, 1**)

Another Talmudic source discusses the order, and has the Priest trim the five lamps first, and then the two others. (cf. **Yoma 33b**) Here, the reason given is that since the Priest has begun the trimming of the lamps, let him do the majority of it, leaving only a minority of the mitzvah to be completed.

One Midrash is fascinated by the argument over the order of these mitzvot, and wonders why these particular rituals are so hard to pin down as to exactly how they are to be done. The answer is that this is the only ritual which is fit to be performed from the evening clear through to the following morning. But, why, asks this Midrash are some lamps lit, the incense lighted, and then the lamps are finished? (**Yalkut Shimoni Tetzaveh, 386**) This Midrash cites the opinion of Resh Lakish who says that the reason is so that the whole Temple space will "feel" these Mitzvot. It seems that the coming of the light needs to be gradual, and the scent of the incense needs to be seen as being accompanied by light. These Mitzvot complement each other, and each one benefits by being tied to the other. Indeed, **Sefer ha-Hinukh** comments that even though these are written in the Torah as two Mitzvot, those who counted the Mitzvot in the Torah counted them as one Mitzvah. (103)

Even though one has begun one Mitzvah, another Mitzvah can interrupt the first, and then one must go back and complete the first one. This is a fascinating comment on how one performs Mitzvot. Perhaps we need to be more flexible in our demands of ourselves in this area. Sometimes, breaking up the completion of a Mitzvah will create a feeling of holiness, as it did in the Temple. Sometimes, we need to be aware that in order to finish a Mitzvah we may have to take its motivation from other places, just as the Priest might have to take fire from the altar in order to light the Menorah. In any case, this discussion gives us much food for thought on how we prioritize Mitzvot, and it gives us much to learn about how to be flexible in this task. TTT 122 K

**\*Ex. 30, 9**

*You shall not offer alien incense ("ketoret zarah") on it, or a burnt offering or a meal offering; neither shall you pour a libation on it."*

As part of the laws governing the incense altar we read: "You shall not offer alien incense ("ketoret zarah") on it, or a burnt offering or a meal offering; neither shall you pour a libation on it." (Ex. 30, 9) The incense altar is covered in gold and placed directly in front of the curtain that is over the Ark of the Covenant. It is stipulated that it will be in the place where God meets humans. The high priest is to burn incense every morning when he tends the lamps of the Menorah and every evening when he lights the lamps. (Ex. 30, 1-10)

The explication and homiletic exegesis of the rules and practices of the incense altar could fill a book. I want to concentrate on one aspect, the prohibition of offering anything on this altar other than a specific form of incense made in a specific way. The term which expresses the forbidden act is alien incense ("ketoret zarah"). What makes an incense "alien"?

The simplest explanation, and one which used to be most common knowledge for every Jew who prayed, was that if the formula for the incense was not strictly adhered to or if a foreign ingredient, like honey, were added to it, then the incense would be forbidden. The basis of this ruling, **BT Kritot 6a**, is known for its inclusion in the study texts of the morning prayer service ("pitum ha-ketoret"). This interpretation seems most logical. If the Torah prescribes a very specific way of making the incense for the priestly ritual, then if one did not follow that prescription, that act itself would be a transgression. That is, it is not enough to do a mitzvah in any old way that one feels like doing it, rather there are specific ways in which a ritual must be observed.

Now, this approach is common in religious circles. The subsequent halakhic concretization of this rule, as is most often the case, defines flexibility in the implementation of the law. That is, there is more "wiggle room" than there appears at first glance. (cf. **Rambam, Klei Mikdash 2, 8 and Pesulei ha-Mekudashin 3, 18**) Still, the general idea is quite clear. An alien action is one in which the rules are not followed, even though the action may appear to be the same as the prescribed one on the outside, it really does not fulfill the requirements because some ingredients are wrong. Perhaps this would be somewhat akin to the idea of truth in advertising as regards ingredients in foodstuff. Not long ago there was a case of a baby food manufacturer in Israel that did not put one of the necessary ingredients in the baby formula powder, and children became ill and even died from the lack of this ingredient. **TTT 123 HA and P and S**

The second approach in the Talmudic literature is that the alien incense is incense brought as a free will offering. The Talmud specifies that a free will offering ("nedava") of incense was permitted in only one case, namely, when the chieftains of the tribes brought their offerings during the dedication of the Tabernacle. (cf. Num. 7, 12ff.) The Talmud makes it very clear that neither an individual nor the community may offer free will incense on this altar. Even though the communities' free will offering may be considered to be like an obligatory offering our verse uses the plural form for the word "offering" to indicate that even the community may not make a free will offering of incense on this altar. (**Menahot 50a-b**)

Here the meaning of alien incense ("ketoret zarah") does not refer to the makeup of the incense itself, but rather to the spirit in which it is offered! What turns the acceptable offering into an unacceptable one is that it is made without obligation. The acceptable incense can only accompany public obligatory worship. (cf. **Zevahim 27b**) This is a fascinating distinction. It seems to be related to the notion that a person who performs a mitzvah out of a sense of obligation is more worthy than a person who performs the mitzvah voluntarily. (cf. **Kiddushin 31a et al**) **TTT 123 M**

Indeed, this case sheds light on why the one who is obligated has preference over the one who chooses of free will to do something. The burning of incense on the altar

required making very specific and prescribed preparations. Presumably, a person just bringing incense as a free will offering would do so without such meticulous preparation. Furthermore, our acceptable offering is at certain times and in certain circumstances, whereas the "nedava" is whenever the person feels like it. That is, there are two characteristics of obligation, preparation and timing that are not necessarily characteristic of voluntary actions. It is these characteristics that make the fulfilling of an obligation into a more worthy act than merely doing the act on any kind of whim. The very nature of obligations is in that they demand preparation, concentration and sensitivity to the moment. This is particularly true in obligations between people in the context of marriage or family. Consider the man who spontaneously brings home flowers when he feels like it, but forgets to do so on a birthday or anniversary. What seems like loving acts are belied by inattention to the very covenant which is the foundation of the relationship. **TTT 123 M and HA**

A third attempt to explain the nature of alien incense is to see it as a symbol for idolatry. Actually, a specific type of idolatry is referred to here, the type that results from licentiousness or corporeal depravity. This approach is found in the medieval philosophic tradition and in the later Hasidic and Musar traditions. R. Yitzhak Arama notes that the incense altar is commanded only after all of the rules of the whole sacrificial system have been spelled out. The altar itself is a symbol of the worship of the stars, or of astrological signs. The rule against using the altar for any type of sacrifice and the restriction of the incense to a particular kind made only by the priests is to warn against thinking that anything in the sacrificial system is intended in any idolatrous fashion. (**Akedat Yitzhak Gate 48, notes on gate 48 no. 3**)

It seems that here the alien incense is taken to stand for the yetzer ha-ra, the evil impulse, which drives one to give up one's Jewish practice for idolatrous practices. R. Hayyim Tirer of Czernowitz connects this to the saying that the mitzvot are only intended to purify a person. That is, the mitzvot need to be performed in a state of mind of drawing oneself closer to God, and to separate oneself from baser impulses. The actual physical performance of the mitzvah is flawed without this state of mind. The incense is symbolic of right intentions, and alien incense is alien intentions in performing the mitzvah. (**Sefer Be'er Mayyim Hayyim on Tetzave 27**)

Finally, in the modern period we find a type of literature known as "hanhagot" that is associated with personal spiritual and ethical improvement. In one of these treatises on "a fast of speech" ("ta'anit dibbur"), in which one specifies a period of silence, Rabbi Isaac Alpi talks about things which one must do in order not to anger one's fellow. He writes: "One must not smoke cigarettes in the Synagogue, and if you cannot hold out you must go outside to smoke a cigarette so that on a day of repentance [the fast day] such as this there not be "alien incense" in the Synagogue, and it be filled with such smoke. Particularly one must be careful not to cause grief to those people, for there are many such, who do not smoke and for whom smoke is a distress. And if one suffers a little by withholding himself from smoking, don't consider this a great thing, rather it is an improvement ("tikkun") in that he mortifies himself a little and this helps in atoning for his sins." Here the alien incense ("ketoret zarah") is represented by cigarette smoke in the sense that it represents insensitivity to the health and comfort of others. The reason alien incense ("ketoret zarah") is forbidden in the public space is that there we are called to higher standards of

sensitivity and we are called to personal restraint of our own desires in order to manifest that sensitivity. **TTT 123 M**

**\*Ex. 30, 22 – 25; 31 – 33**

*<sup>22</sup>The LORD spoke to Moses, saying: <sup>23</sup>Next take choice spices: five hundred weight of solidified myrrh, half as much – two hundred and fifty – of fragrant cinnamon, two hundred and fifty of aromatic cane, <sup>24</sup>five hundred – by the sanctuary weight – of cassia, and a □□□ of olive oil. <sup>25</sup>Make of this a sacred anointing oil, a compound of ingredients expertly blended, to serve as sacred anointing oil <sup>31</sup>And speak to the Israelite people, as follows: This shall be an anointing oil sacred to Me throughout the ages. <sup>32</sup>It must not be rubbed on any person's body, and you must not make anything like it in the same proportions; it is sacred, to be held sacred by you. <sup>33</sup>Whoever compounds its like, or puts any of it on a layman, shall be cut off from his kin.*

In the beginning of this week's parasha we continue reading the saga of the Tabernacle and the priests who serve in it. Israel is commanded to make a "sacred anointing oil" (Ex. 30, 25 "shemen mishhat kodesh"). This oil is used to anoint all of the Tabernacle and Aaron, the high priest, and his sons. The Torah specifies the formula of this oil. Its function in anointing the priests is spelled out thus: "You shall also anoint Aaron and his sons, consecrating them to serve Me as priests. And speak to the Israelite people, as follows: This shall be an anointing oil sacred to Me throughout the ages. It must not be rubbed on any person's body, and you must not make anything like it in the same proportions; it is sacred, to be held sacred by you. Whoever compounds its like, or puts any of it on a layman, shall be cut off from his kin." (Ex. 30, 30-33)

The sanctity of this oil is emphasized in a most striking manner. It is not to touch any person, other than the high priest, nor can any compound like it be made, it is sacred. Even more so, the warning of "karet", being "cut off from his kin", is attached to anyone who dares to make such a compound. What lies behind these stringent rules concerning a seemingly simple thing like spiced oil?

One approach is to view the oil in its context as an item of the sacred tabernacle. It is no less sacred than anything else in the purview of the sanctuary. The job of the oil is to protect from the elements, and it is to soften the skin. Apparently, the ingredients also produce an oil with a good smelling fragrance. It is inherent in the sanctifying, and must be smeared on in order for the sanctifying to take place. Indeed, it is forbidden to use the oil on a non-priest, and to make an exact replication of the formula.

Now, this is interesting, because the formula is no secret. Indeed, the Torah gives us the recipe very clearly. **Rashi**, summarizing the Talmudic discussion on this, says that it is forbidden to smear the oil on a non-priest, from this very oil itself. That is, one could make oil like this, if it was not EXACTLY the same amounts and compound as the oil of the Torah. (on Ex. 30, 32)

The main discussion of the compound and its strictures is found at the beginning of Keritoth. There, the discussion expands, as is the Talmudic custom, to cases where the priest himself may be guilty. For example, if he touches his head, upon which the oil has been poured, and rubs his stomach with his hand. The Talmud learns that this priest is guilty, for it is written "he shall not smear it on a person". (cf. **Bavli Keritoth**



7a) Now, this interpretation understands the Hebrew "yyisach", as both passive and active, since the word has two "yodin". But, there is a great lesson here. The misuse of the sacred oil is not only for one who uses it on a layman, but a priest may be guilty of this misuse on himself!

The Bavli here goes into a long and protracted discussion of the two negative commands, that it cannot be smeared on a non-priest and its exact compound cannot be made, and the additional punishment of kareth which is mandated for these. The lesson learned is that each one of the negative commands needs a separate sin-offering. The point here is that one is enough for kareth. The doubling of the warning is to show that each one is considered a separate offense. (**Keritoth 3a**)

In the Yerushalmi, this passage ends with a most astonishing utterance. (Some Bavli texts have a version like this, but it is not clear how the text should be constructed.) After making the same point that two such warnings for one kareth punishment implies that each one, if unintentional, needs a separate sin-offering, the Yerushalmi adds: "and this is according to R. Ishmael, for R. Ishmael said that we learn [to fix the law] by using a kal va-homer, logical argument from the words of the verse, but we do not punish by using a kal va-homer." (**Yerushalmi Yev. 11, hal. 1**)

The force of interpretation is limited. The fixing of blame and punishment needs to be based on more than logical exegesis alone. This dictum of R. Ishmael (in the Bavli it is the rabbis who take what seems to be a similar view) seems to add a dimension of moral responsibility and sensitivity to the workings of the Oral Torah. It seems to be a defense of the rights of potential sinners. The Rabbis must make sure that the offense is clear and unambiguous to all, otherwise, perhaps, they should not be meting out punishments for it. **TTT 124 HA**

#### **Ex. 32, 4 - 10; 26 - 29**

*<sup>4</sup>This he took from them and cast in a mold, and made it into a molten calf. And they exclaimed, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!" <sup>5</sup>When Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron announced: "Tomorrow shall be a festival of the LORD!" <sup>6</sup>Early next day, the people offered up burnt offerings and brought sacrifices of well-being; they sat down to eat and drink, and then rose to dance. <sup>7</sup>The LORD spoke to Moses, "Hurry down, for your people, whom you brought out of the land of Egypt, have acted basely. <sup>8</sup>They have been quick to turn aside from the way that I enjoined upon them. They have made themselves a molten calf and bowed low to it and sacrificed to it, saying: 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you out of the land of Egypt!'" <sup>9</sup>The LORD further said to Moses, "I see that this is a stiffnecked people. <sup>10</sup>Now, let Me be, that My anger may blaze forth against them and that I may destroy them, and make of you a great nation."*

*<sup>26</sup>Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come here!" And all the Levites rallied to him. <sup>27</sup>He said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin." <sup>28</sup>The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. <sup>29</sup>And Moses said, "Dedicate yourselves to the LORD this day – for each of you has been against son and brother – that He may bestow a blessing upon you today."*

The children of Israel make an idol, the golden calf. They cry out "this is your god, Israel, which took you out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4) It is a moment which is almost

inexplicable, and the story in the book of Exodus, even though seemingly clear, is full of teasing phrases that forces a reader to ask themselves what exactly happened.

But, the outcome of this idolatry is painfully clear. God is so angered that he tells Moses that he is going to wipe out the whole nation, and start a new nation from Moses (Ex. 32:10) Moses is so angered by what he sees when he returns to the camp, that he breaks the tablets of the covenant. He then takes the idol, burns it and grinds it up into fine powder, sprinkling it in water and makes the people of Israel drink it.

Then: "Moses stood up in the gate of the camp and said, "Whoever is for the LORD, come here!" And all the Levites rallied to him. He said to them, "Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin." The Levites did as Moses had bidden; and some three thousand of the people fell that day. And Moses said, "Dedicate yourselves to the LORD this day—for each of you has been against son and brother—that He may bestow a blessing upon you today." (Ex. 32:26-29)

One Midrash (Ex. R. 42, 6) understands that the 3000 who are killed are not Israelites, but the "erev rav", the non-Israelites who joined in with Israel when they left Egypt (Ex. 12:38). In this Midrash God tells Moses not to accept them, but Moses who is a modest and feeling person takes them in. The Midrash proves that these are the ones killed because of what is said when the golden calf is worshipped "this is your god, Israel, which took you out of Egypt" (Ex. 32:4), note "your god, Israel" and not "our god". This Midrash, in one simple exegesis, justifies Moses command to kill 3000 people and exonerates Israel. But then, why does God speak of wiping out the whole nation, if only a small number of non-Israelites are at fault?

This question and others lead most Midrashim to reject the interpretation of Ex. R. 42, 6. This is expressed most succinctly by **R. Hayyim ben Moshe Attar, Or ha-Hayyim**, in his comment on Ex. 32:4. He points out that even if the initiative for the calf came from the "erev rav", it was Israelites who actually worshipped it, as we see from the continuation of the text. Certainly, he points out, if this were NOT the case, Moses' command: "slay brother, neighbor, and kin" would make no sense. The problem is that they are to slay their relatives, i.e. Israelites.

But, this understanding presents us with the biggest problem of them all as regards this story. In the Mishnah of **Makkot (1:10)** we read that a Sanhedrin which puts a criminal to death once in 7 years is called a murderous court, and R. Eliezer b. Azariah says even once in 70 years. Furthermore, we know that the death penalty could not be administered except as a result of following a very rigorous and strict procedure which includes witnesses to the event and even a warning to the criminal about the consequences of their act. So how can Moses summarily command the execution of so many people in one day?!

**Or ha-Hayyim** relates to this issue in his comment on Ex. 32:29, "Dedicate yourselves ("millu yedkhem") to the LORD this day—for each of you has been against son and brother—that He may bestow a blessing upon you today." The phrase "milla yad", literally "fill up your hand", usually means, as in the JPS translation here, "dedicate". This is a phrase which has to do with preparation for something. The purpose of a hand is to hold things, to be filled up, and thus "dedicate to" in the sense of fulfilling

a purpose. Thus some commentators thought that this verse should have come before v. 27, the command to kill.

Or ha-Hayyim, however, thinks this verse is in the right place. It is a special use of the phrase “milla yad”, and it signifies an attempt by Moses to deal with the depression of the Levites over what they had done. Or ha-Hayyim reasons that if a Sanhedrin, which executed a person according to all the legal procedures, feels the guilt of being a murderous court once in seven or seventy years, that the Levites who put to death almost 3,000 in one day would certainly “find the light of their souls dimmed”. Moses tells them that they had no choice. The reality of the desert and the situation of God’s threat to destroy the whole nation is not the reality of a settled State with a king and a court system. They had to sacrifice some of the true sinners in order to spare the whole of the nation from God’s wrath.

Extreme situations call into question the procedures and rules of justice. In extreme situations it may be justified to give up some lives to spare many more. This is a common argument to justify such actions. **TTT 125 M** Another Midrash paints the picture in even stronger terms (**Tanna de-Bei Eliyahu Rabbah, 4**). When Moses says to the Levites: “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin.” (v. 27), he is misleading them!! God never told him to say that. According to this Midrash, Moses calculatingly realizes that if he does not “hang this order on the honor of Heaven” the Israelites will never do it. If Moses says this on his own, the Israelites will argue with him that such a decree is against the Mishnah. Moses formulates this strategy as a way to prevent God from wiping out the whole people. He then turns to God and tells God that enough have been handed over. He tells God that the main perpetrators have been executed, and thus there is no need to kill 600,000 and the “erev rav” with them. Otherwise, he claims “there is no end to it”. God’s desire to wipe out the WHOLE people is an untenable situation, an extreme situation. Such TOTAL punishment, which seems to be TOTAL justice, is in reality akin to evil, not good. In order to restore some semblance of justice, rules may be broken, and it is justified to execute some to save the majority. **TTT 125 M and S**

Even though this Midrash and Or ha-Hayyim justify Moses’ action in the light of the threat to the very existence of all the nation, they do so by showing the dejection and melancholy that accompanies such decisions. Moses is not praised. The Levites are not full of joy and uplifted spirits. Indeed, perhaps the way which the priests hold their hands while blessing the people is a direct symbol of the untenable nature of this deed. The “full hand”, a hand which can hold a sword, is not the hand of blessing. When the hand is open, there can be no weapon in it. When the fingers of the hand is spread apart in a form which makes it impossible to use it for any violent activity, only then can the hands become a symbol of God’s blessing for the people. Each time the priests bless the nation they hold their hands in a way which repudiates the role of their hands in killing their brethren during the crisis of the golden calf.

**\*Ex. 34, 1**

*The LORD said to Moses: “Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered.*

The dramatic story is well known. The Israelites are impatient and think Moses has disappeared. They make a gold calf and declare it "god". Moses, upon seeing this scene, lifts the two tablets of stone over his head and flings them to the ground whereupon they shatter. But, God wants Moses to give the tablets of the law to Israel. So, "The Lord said to Moses: "Carve two tablets of stone like the first, and I will inscribe upon the tablets the words that were on the first tablets, which you shattered." (Ex. 34:1)

I wish to relate to a most amazing commentary on this verse found in the Talmud (**Nedarim 38a**). This comment starts with the Hebrew of our verse, "pesal lekha", literally "carve for yourself". Indeed, the addition of the word "lekha" to a verb is usually interpreted as meaning that the action performed is for the benefit of the one doing it. The most famous example is "lekh lekha", "you shall go forth", which is told to Abraham (Gen. 12:1). There, the Midrash makes it clear that the action of going forth from Ur is for Abraham's benefit.

If that is the way that the word "lekha" is used, what benefit could have accrued to Moses by virtue of performing the difficult task of carving tablets out of stone? Rabbi Hama b. Hanina understands the word "pesal", "carve", to mean the "carvings" of what is REMOVED from the stone. The Hebrew word "pesolet", from the same root, means chippings, what is usually thrown away.

The word "lekha", as is usual, means "are for your benefit". Thus R. Hama comments: "Moses became wealthy from the chippings of the tablets, for it is written, 'Carve for yourself two tablets of stone like unto the first'; that is, their chips are for yourself." Apparently R. Hama's statement depends upon knowing the Midrashic tradition that the materiel out of which the tablets were carved was "sapir", that is lapis lazuli, or sapphire (cf.. for example, **Pirkei de-R. Eliezer 45; Yalkut Shimoni 854**). Thus, the chips of this precious stone could make someone wealthy. Here, the irony of it is that the main product of the carving, the tablets containing God's word are priceless, but EVEN from the "pesolet" of the tablets one can gain materiel wealth.

Another view of Moses' benefits as expressed in our verse is given by R. Yose b. Hanina. R. Yose says: "The Torah was given only to Moses and his seed, for it is written, "write for yourself" ("ketov lekha" 34:27) [and] "Carve for yourself" (34:1), just as the chips are for you, so is the writing for you. But Moses, in his generosity, gave it to Israel." This is surely one of the most unusual statements in Biblical commentary, and it draws sharp rebuttals. R. Yose seems to fly in the face of the Torah text by insinuating that just as the chips are for Moses alone, so the words of the tablets are also for him alone! It is ONLY because Moses is a person of great generosity that he passes the Torah text on to Israel. (**Nedarim, ibid.**) **TTT 126 S**

This view is immediately challenged by R. Hisda who quotes the verse: "And the Lord commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments" (Deut. 4:14) The Talmud, speaking for R. Hama, answers from the verse "commanded me", and I, generously passed them on to you. The same question is raised from other verses which seem to say directly that Moses is to teach the Torah to all Israel. But each of these verses can be interpreted that the Torah is for Moses alone, and that he, on his own, decided to teach all Israel. Finally, the Talmudic sugya ends by interpreting R. Hama to mean that of course Moses was meant to teach the Torah to all of Israel.

What God meant for Moses alone was only "pilpula be-almah", the dialectical analysis of Torah, and Moses, being generous passed THAT along to Israel. Rashi explains the phrase to mean the analysis of Torah which we characterize as Torah she-be-al Peh, Oral Torah. The Hatam Sofer specifically thinks that the principles of interpretation are what is meant. In any case, this Talmudic passage infers that the Oral Torah was known to all of Israel, only because of Moses' generosity.

I take this passage to be instructive of how teachers of Torah relate to Torah. There are those who can gain materiel wealth from Torah, but that is only from the chips of Torah, from the "pesolet" that falls by the side in the process of forming the tablets themselves. Others transmit only what is in black and white, what can be clearly seen and read. And, those who are most generous give their insights and use the sharpest parts of their minds to uncover new meaning and new meaningfulness and relevance in the text. They expand the ability of Torah to be alive for us and to guide us in every day life. Such understanding is something which is, at first, theirs alone, but they cannot help but share it with others. Because Moses shared this gift from God with Israel, ANYONE who studies Torah today can potentially be in that situation.

I view this Talmudic passage as expressing a view which is the antithesis of the view expressed by R. Yehoshua b. Levi, namely that God gave Moses all the details of the Oral Torah until the end of time: "even what a student will teach in the future in class with the Rabbi was already told to Moses at Sinai" (cf. **Yerushalmi Peah 2, hal. 4; Neg. 4, hal. 1; Hag. 1, hal. 8**). This view has become a widespread dogma.

The view of R. Hama b. Hanina, that God gave to Moses "pilpula be-alma", is antithetical to the Yerushalmi. I take the phrase to mean "pilpula", sharp inquiry, that is the faculty of intelligence and deep thought that human's are endowed with. My reading of the word "be-alma" is its usual meaning: "the general way". That is, "be-alma" is something which is not specified, the general or ordinarily found thing.

By this understanding what is said is as follows: God gave Israel a text. They could very well have said, and maybe they did, that is all we need. Now that we have the text from God we just look at it and follow what is written. But, to Moses God said, you can use your God-given intelligence and sharp inquiring mind to interpret and develop this text. Perhaps God, knowing that a fixed text cannot be effective for very long, wanted to give the permission to Moses, as the leader, to use his mind to explicate the text.

Moses, being generous, and probably also truly prophetic, \*passed on the same permission to use one's general intelligence to interpret and develop Torah\*. Moses was NOT given every piece of Oral Torah that would ever be thought of in the future, but he was given a general permission to use his God-given mind to create an Oral Torah to begin with. (For this same view, cf. **Tanna de-bei Eliyahu Zuta, 2**) Thus, ANYONE who studies Torah and uses their mind can become part of the process which Moses started. **TTT 126 S and HA and K**

In the continuation of the same Talmudic passage, R. Yohanan says that God gives prophecy only to those who are "strong ("gibor"), wealthy, wise, and humble". All of these qualities are found in Moses. We know about wealth from the chips of the

Tablets, we also know about wisdom and humility. But, how do we know that Moses was big and strong, like say “the Shaq”.

The first proof-text for Moses physical strength is that he was able to spread the curtains of the tent \*over the top of the poles\* by himself. Now if each pole was 10 amot, Moses must have been able to dunk a basket without even jumping very much. But, then the Talmud asks, perhaps Moses was very tall, but skinny. This does not prove that he was strong.

The proof for his strength was in the fact that he was able to lift the two tablets and smash them to the ground breaking them to pieces. This requires tremendous strength because the Tablets were 6 by 6 by 3 tefachim, that is about 1 and a half meter long and wide, and about 75 cm. thick. Both Rashi and Tosefot explain that it would require enormous strength to be able to smash a block of stone that thick. Adin Steinsaltz adds another aspect to this issue. He points out that stone tablets of this volume, taking the average weight of stone, would be about 250 kilograms!! This puts Moses up there with top Olympic weightlifters. So not only could he dunk, but he was probably great on rebounding too.

Even more interesting, to my mind, is the fact that when Rambam deals with the qualities of prophecy, he includes “gibor”, but he says that it means “heightened spiritual qualities”, totally transforming the physical strength alluded to in the Talmud, into intellectual strength. (**Yesodei Torah, 7:1**)

**\*Ex. 34. 14**

*<sup>14</sup>for you must not worship any other god, because the LORD, whose name is Impassioned, is an impassioned God.*

The story of the golden calf is exceedingly rich and busy with central incidents of Jewish thought and religion. The need for a concrete god, the making of the calf and Aaron's role, Moses breaking the first tablets, and the fraternal war which results from all of this. In addition to all of these, there is the dramatic denouement of the story. Moses must carve new tablets and redo them. He ascends a second time up the mountain.

What is Moses feeling at this point? It is hard to gauge his emotions, but it might be fair to say that he is a bit depressed. One thing is very important to him, and that is knowledge of God's attributes. He wants to see God, and know how God works. (Ex. 33:17-23) This is a seminal incident for understanding how to talk about God. (cf. my article “Metaphors for God”, Conservative Judaism, Vol. LI, no. 2, Winter 1999, p. 69-80.)

One phrase disturbs. It is the verse: "... the LORD, whose name is Impassioned ("adonai kana shemo"), is an impassioned God. ("el kana hu")" (Ex. 34:14) The Hebrew word "kana" literally means "jealous" or "envious". The usage of "kana" is combined with "nekamah", vengeance. The jealous God seeks vengeance. The JPS translation "impassioned", sloughs over the problematics of implying that God's name, or essence, is jealousy, envy, or that God seeks revenge. "Kana" is the root used for the "jealous" or "envious" husband of the Sotah ritual. Indeed, JPS there translates "kana" as jealousy in a consistent fashion (Num. 5). **Rashi** and others see

the command to destroy the altars of other gods as an expression of jealousy and even envy, and thus understand our phrase very simply (cf. **Midrash ha-Neelam, Bereshit, "kaniti ish et adonai"**).

There are attempts to understand this problematic phrase in other ways. R. Nissim of Gerondi states that the punishments which people feel are from God are not an end in themselves. Rather, they are means to help the individual straighten out, or to protect others so that they will not be attracted to follow the misdeeds of the evil person. That is, God is not really a jealous and avenging God, for the punishment is in itself NOT an act of vengeance, but is meant for the welfare of the sinner. (**Drashot ha-Ran, drasha 10**) TTT 127 T

Ran learns this because the Torah commands us: "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your fellow as yourself: I am the LORD." Ran knows that God will not command something that God does not also do! Since God commands us to withhold vengeance, it is clear that it is not a worthy thing in itself. It seems to me that Ran, by quoting the beginning of the verse to make his point about revenge, implies that God, the end of the verse "I am the Lord", is defined by "love your fellow as yourself." That is, even in punishment it is love which is being expressed.

This explanation strikes me as apologetic. As parents we can sympathize with the idea of punishment as an expression of love. We can agree that punishment is never an end in itself. Still, why do we need the description of God as "jealous" or "vengeful" at all? Indeed, if we take into account Ran's point, that revenge is forbidden, stating that it is part of God's character seems counterproductive.

R. Saadiah Gaon takes the path of the philosophers. He points out that BOTH the mercy and the revenge which are stated of God, do NOT apply to God at all, but refer to God's creatures. It cannot be referring to God, since God has no such qualities. R. Saadiah points out that the verse: "For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, an impassioned God." (Deut. 4:24) reveals the absurdity of speaking about God in such terms. Fire is created and it needs material substance with which to burn, and it eventually is extinguished. To think that such categories apply to God is truly irrational. Humans are jealous and vengeful, God is not. When the Torah speaks of God in this "human" way, we must be aware that it is using metaphor or applying human categories to God, because the human mind cannot comprehend God. (**Emunot ve-deot, 2:12; 7:1**)

R. Saadiah makes it clear that facile transmission of the metaphoric language of Scripture can do harm. If we are to be honest and avoid causing damage to others, we must be very careful in how we speak about God.

**\*Ex. 34, 21**

*<sup>21</sup>Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor; you shall cease from labor even at plowing time and harvest time.*

I find fascinating two issues that are always present in the back of my mind as I study Torah. One issue is how close is the "peshat", the meaning of the text as it was created in the context of the ancient near east, to halakha. This may be a particular

fixation of Conservative Jews who accept the historical, critical, philological study of the Bible, and also accept the halakha. The other issue is the creative dynamism of how halakha is related to the text. I call it: "how many halakhot can dance on the head of a phrase?"

The end of parashat Ki Tissa contains one of the many listings of holidays that are found in the Torah. This listing is particularly short and particularly enigmatic. Exodus Chapter 34 recounts the second covenant that Moses and the people make with God, the one on the second set of tablets. This covenant stresses, more than the first, that the nation is to stay totally away from the gods of the Canaanites, not to marry them for fear that the nation will be tempted to eat together and sacrifice together. (Ex. 34, 12-17) One can hardly be surprised at the severity of these rules, considering that they come right after the making of the golden calf.

Immediately the list of holidays begins: "You shall observe the Feast of Unleavened Bread – eating unleavened bread for seven days, as I have commanded you – at the set time of the month of Abib, for in the month of Abib you went forth from Egypt." (Ex. 34, 18) Then follows laws about the first born of animals and humans, vv. 19-20. It is clear that the topic of first born is connected to the Feast of Unleavened Bread through the allusion to the role of the first born in that festival. But, why is the mention of these holidays part of the narration of the covenant. To me it seems clear that the prohibition against eating or cavorting with the Canaanites has to do with their festivals. When does one eat, sacrifice and have family gatherings? The answer is: at holiday times. So basically, the holidays listed here are specifically recounted to say to the nation that they are to have nothing to do with holidays of the Canaanites, RATHER here are your holidays which you must observe meticulously.

The list continues with Shabbat: "Six days you shall work, but on the seventh day you shall cease from labor; you shall cease from labor even at plowing time and harvest time. ("be-harish u-va-katzir tishbot" literally: "cease from plowing and from harvesting")" (v. 21) Then we are notified about the Feast of Weeks, for the wheat harvest (Shavuot); and the Feast of Ingathering (Sukkot) (v. 22). Three times a year Israel is to show itself to God (v. 23-24). Then follow more rules specific to each festival. The sacrifice, presumably of Pesah, cannot be with leaven, and cannot be left over. All first fruits must be brought for Shavuot, and one is forbidden to boil a kid in its mother's milk, which somehow must be related to Sukkot, if these laws follow the order of the festivals just spelled out. **TTT 128 HA**

This text presents many difficulties, but I wish to concentrate on just one. What is the verse on Shabbat doing in this list, and what is the intent of focusing on plowing and harvesting? It is stuffed in between the more expansive verses about Passover, and the more cryptic verses about Shavuot and Sukkot (I use our common names for these holidays, not the names used in the passage.) Indeed, this list clearly ties the holidays to an agricultural cycle of the year: the first born of animals, the wheat harvest and the ingathering of fruits. My first thought is that the prohibition against plowing and harvesting must have something to do with the Sabbatical year, as part of the cycle of festivals which are described in agricultural terms. The word Shabbat is often used for the Sabbatical year. But, this verse says six and seven DAYS and not years.



How many halakhot dance on this phrase? The Mishnah already bolsters my first thought. It uses our verse in the context of the prohibition against plowing or harvesting in the Sabbatical year. The Mishnah reasons that this verse is NOT telling us about the general prohibition as that is very clear elsewhere, so our verse must come to inform us that plowing on the eve of the sixth year going into the seventh is forbidden; and that harvesting from the end of the seventh year is forbidden. **(Sheviit 1, 4)**

In the Talmud the whole subject of adding from the profane to the holy is derived from this interpretation. It is R. Akiba who creates the Midrash halakha which is the basis of the Mishnah. R. Ishmael, as usual, disagrees. He thinks that the verse specifies plowing and harvesting that are optional, in order to inform us that the harvesting of the Omer is to be done in the Sabbatical year, because it is an obligation. **(RH 9a)** The verse is understood to specify plowing and harvesting, because these are the beginning and end activities of agriculture. **TTT 128 HA and T**

The idea that one must add onto sacred time from both the beginning and the end is a precious one. Indeed, our Talmud passage adds that since the verse speaks of Shabbat AND is understood to refer to the Sabbatical year, that we can learn a general rule. Every place where intentional and purposeful rest ("shvut") is the goal of the mitzvah, this demands adding to the sacred time at each end. It is because Shabbat rest and Sabbatical year rest are purposeful, that they create harmony between people, the world and God, that their prescribed time needs to be augmented. It is a tribute to the sacredness of having a "spirit of restfulness" or "a spirit of harmony and tranquility" that demands the addition of time.

Another halakha which is learned from our verse is that each category of forbidden work on Shabbat ("melakhah") is to be considered separate, thus, a person who does more than one offense is liable to multiple punishments. If the Torah had not specified both plowing and harvesting as separate offenses, one might have assumed that a person had to transgress all 39 melakhot in order to be culpable. **(Shabbat 70a)**

Finally, my favorite. The Mishnah in Horayot informs us: "If the court ruled that an entire principle has to be uprooted; if they said, for example, that [the law concerning the] menstruant is not found in the torah or the [law concerning the] sabbath is not found in the torah or [the law concerning] idolatry is not found in the torah, they are Exempt. If, however, they ruled that a part [of a Commandment] was to be annulled and a part retained, they are liable. How is this so? If they said: ... [or that the law concerning the] Sabbath occurs in the Torah but if a man carries anything from a private domain to a public domain he is exempt, [or that the law of] idolatry occurs in the Torah, but if a man only bows down to an idol he is exempt, they are liable; for scripture says, "and if some thing be hid ("ve-ne'elam davar")" (Lev. 4, 13) something ("davar") but not the entire principle." **(Horayot 3b)**

So, if a court mistakenly promulgates a decision that says there is no such thing as Shabbat in the Torah, they are exempt. All those people who went out on Shabbat and spent money on shopping have no sacrifice they have to bring. But, if the court mistakenly ruled that they were permitted to carry the money from one domain to another, they will be culpable for everything.

R. Zeira asks a wonderful question. What if a court declares that in a Sabbatical year there will be no Shabbat observed. How could a court make such a blunder? They misinterpret our verse: "you shall cease from labor at plowing time and harvest time ("be-harish u-va-katzir tishbot"). They take it to mean that Shabbat only applies when plowing or harvesting is going on, but in the Sabbatical year when there is no plowing and harvesting, there is no need for Shabbat. The question is: is their ruling a partial annulling of a mitzvah, since they keep Shabbat in all other years and only annul it in the Sabbatical year, and they are culpable; or since they totally annul it in the Sabbatical year is it a case of total annulment, and they are exempt? (**Horayot 4b**)

A Beraita is brought that teaches the opposite of our Mishnah. Rabbi Shimon says that a prophet who annuls part of a mitzvah, but keeps part, is exempt. But, R. Shimon agrees that if the prophet says that one can worship an idol and tomorrow burn it, that he is culpable. That is, even R. Shimon, who rules that one who annuls part of a mitzvah is exempt, agrees that the case where a mitzvah is totally annulled and then totally reinstated is different. Like the case of idolatry that R. Shimon cites the law of the Sabbath was to be retained at one time and annulled at another. **TTT 128 HA and S and P**

What is clear is that the different combinations of totally annulling a mitzvah, annulling only part of a mitzvah while keeping most of it, or temporarily annulling a mitzvah totally only to totally reinstate it later deserve to be analyzed closely and carefully. The various halakhot dancing on the phrase "be-harish u-va-katzir tishbot" open a window into the colorful and exciting world of Torah. And, by the way, did you notice how close some of the halakhic discussion is to "peshat"?

**\*Ex. 34, 27**

*The Lord said to Moses, you should write ("ketav lekha") these matters, for by the force of ("al-pi") these matters I will make a covenant with you and with Israel"*

After the episode of the golden calf, Moses gets/forms/writes two tablets like the first ones, which he broke. It is not clear what Moses does in regards to the tablets. He is told to form them "pesal lekha", and God will write what was on first tablets (Ex. 34:1). But, later we read: "The Lord said to Moses, you should write ("ketav lekha") these matters, for by the force of ("al-pi") these matters I will make a covenant with you and with Israel" (Ex. 34:27)

Indeed, the Midrash asks the question: who wrote the text, the content, of the second tablets? "Why did the Holy One say "you should write" (34:27)? We have already learned that the tablets were written by God (cf. also Ex. 32:16)!!" The Midrash wants to understand what could it mean for Moses to be a participant in writing down the Torah, when it seems that God is the one who wrote it down.

The answer of the Midrash is: "rather, this is what God said to Moses: you write Torah, Prophets and Writings so that they be written down, but halachot, Midrash, aggadot and Talmud will be spoken orally" (**Ex. R. 47:7**). The Midrash here notes that our verse has two expressions relating to the "matters", the laws and tales, being transmitted from God to Moses and Israel. One expression is "ketav lekha", "you should write down", and the other is "al-pi", which literally means "orally", "by the mouth", but here connotes "by force of".

This conception of the tablets is very unique. The intertwining of Torah she-bikhtav, the written Torah, and Torah she-be-al Peh, the oral Torah is graphically spelled out. The physical tablets and the physical writing on them are the result of a partnership between man and God. The writing down of the sacred text, and its oral explication are all bound up together at the same time. What is unique here in the Midrash is the sense that it is not just a question of God writing something down on stone tablets (C. B. Demille notwithstanding), and passing them to Moses, who has a passive role. But, Moses partakes in the writing, and also in the ensuing discussion of the written text, which produces a PROCESS of learning and discussion about the written text which continues from that moment and forever. **TTT 128 HA and T and K**

In this Midrash the written Torah and the oral Torah are part and parcel of the same process, which includes the physical writing and the more ephemeral talking. It is like the development of life from the union of physical items, sperm and egg, which continues to develop and grow into a much more complex and spiritual organism, a living human being. Truly, the Torah is "a tree of life", in that metaphor.

But, according to this explanation, why are these second tablets necessary? If the process of Torah, of a living Torah, was started with the first tablets, why does the physical part have to happen again? After life is conceived, do the egg and sperm have to meet again? We might think that the answer to that question is that since Israel "rejected" the Torah by building the golden calf that they needed to "reaffirm" "their" acceptance. That is, they seemingly reject their part in the process, and the process has to physically be repeated in order to confirm its validity, FOR THEM.

The Ramban, however, sees the second tablets in a different light altogether. "Since Israel sinned and abrogated the original covenant, God had to renew for them a new covenant, so that God would not abrogate GOD'S SIDE OF THE COVENANT, and told Moses to write the conditions, and that is the meaning of "for by the force of ("al-pi") these matters I will make a covenant with you and with Israel" (Ex. 34:27) .... God needed to make a covenant with them out of forgiveness, in order that God would forgive them...." For Ramban the second tablets are NOT necessary to continue the process of Torah, from Israel's side, but they are necessary from God's side!!!! Since Israel had broken the covenant, God was perfectly in the right to break it as well. God could not allow this to happen, and so God had to have a new covenant and new tablets so that God's mercy toward Israel would not be abrogated. **TTT 128 T**

Many times when one person does something which hurts another person, the relationship between them, which was built on mutual respect and love, is fractured. Even though one party may be in the wrong, and may wish to make up from their side of the relationship, the other side may need to renew the relationship in their own mind, as if it is being done from the beginning. If the relationship was good and meaningful, then that person should make that effort, even if they were the wronged party. This we learn from God. Since the process of Torah is so important, God could not let it be abrogated from either side.

**\*Ex. 34, 28**

*And he was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he ate no bread and drank no water; and he wrote down on the tablets the terms of the covenant, the Ten Commandments.*

According to this week's parasha Moses was 40 days and 40 nights on Mount Sinai where he was taught Torah by God. During that time "he ate no bread and drank no water" (34:28). The Midrash asks the obvious question: "Is it possible that a man can live 40 days without food and water?" (Ex. Rabbah 47:5)

The answer to this question is given, as a tradition of R. Meir, in the form of a proverb: "when you go to a city, follow its customs". Thus, when Moses ascended to the space of the heavenly beings who neither eat nor drink, so he did. The Midrash goes on, that when the heavenly beings came down to earth, they ate and drank, as reported of the angels who visited Abraham: "he stood by them under the tree while they ate" (Gen. 18:8).

This seems to be a very cute or even quaint Midrash. But, there is a lot of food for thought here (pun intended). First, notice that the human and the divine are intertwined in the acts of studying Torah and hachnasat orhim. It is astonishing to think that Moses could have conceived it possible not to eat or drink, because he was totally bound up in the spiritual life of Torah. It is equally astonishing that the angels knew they had to eat and drink, because they could not embarrass their host who was treating them well. Both sides can be comfortable with the other, if they accept the other sides customs as proper and fitting.

It is this comfort with the mixture of divine and human which is a major characteristic of Masorti Judaism, as I see it. This is by no means an easy stance to take. Some might see it as irreverence or somekind of playing tricks, but it is the hallmark of spirituality which tries to cultivate the best of the divine potential in the human, by being aware of kindness and consideration in the divine. **TTT 129 K and T**

**\*Ex. 34, 29-35**

*So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he instructed them concerning all that the Lord had imparted to him on Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moses' face was. Moses would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him.*

On Shabbat my uncle Aharon ben Sarah ve-Yitzhak, Aaron Fenton, passed away. He was the last surviving child of the Finkelstein family, my mother's family, to die. He was a dedicated Conservative Jew, and past president of Temple Sinai in Los Angeles. He also was a mentor to Rabbi Tzvi Graetz, my son, who wrote a beautiful eulogy for him. It is in his memory that I dedicate the following comments.

At the end of this week's parasha we encounter one of those incidents in the Torah which peaks our curiosity in a very strong fashion. After the clash over the golden calf, Moses returns to Mt. Sinai to make the second set of tablets. When he returns from the mountain we read the following: "So Moses came down from Mount Sinai. And as Moses came down from the mountain bearing the two tablets of the Pact, Moses was not aware that the skin of his face was radiant, since he had spoken with Him. Aaron and all the Israelites saw that the skin of Moses' face was radiant; and they shrank from coming near him. But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the chieftains in the assembly returned to him, and Moses spoke to them. Afterward all the Israelites came near, and he instructed them concerning all that the Lord had imparted to him on Mount Sinai. And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face. Whenever Moses went in before the Lord to speak with Him, he would leave the veil off until he came out; and when he came out and told the Israelites what he had been commanded, the Israelites would see how radiant the skin of Moses' face was. Moses would then put the veil back over his face until he went in to speak with Him." (Ex. 34, 29-35)

The intriguing part of this story, what peaks our curiosity, is the veil ("masveh"). Where did Moses get the idea for the veil? It is not commanded, nor is it part of the clothing of the priests. What did he think he was doing by putting it on and taking it off?

The other intriguing aspect of the veil is how the Torah describes its use. Moses meets God, and laws and practices are revealed to him by Divine revelation. One of the results of that meeting, aside from the fact that Moses now has knowledge to teach the nation of Israel, is that his face glows in such a striking way, radiating light that people are taken aback and find it hard to look at him. Now, if the purpose of the veil was to cut back on the light so that people could face Moses as he taught the Lord's words that would make sense. But, the Torah tells us that his custom was just the opposite!! As R. Yitzhak Arama puts it: "... Don't think that the veil's purpose was so that the people could approach Moses, for if that were the case he would have had to put it on when he spoke with them, and take it off when he finished speaking. But, he did exactly the opposite, as the text tells us plainly." (**Akedat Yitzhak gate 54**)

Furthermore, Moses removes the veil when he goes to speak with God, so it is also not meant to be a protective covering for him when facing God. So, what is his purpose in using the veil only when he is, as R. Arama says, "sitting by himself alone"?

Let us recall for a second the events leading up to this point. As we have already stated, the sin of the golden calf causes an angry, livid Moses, to break the original tablets. He is consumed with fury and zeal, and grinds down the idol putting the powder in water and forcing people to drink it. Finally, his zeal bursts out by demanding that those who join him "for the Lord" kill every person who was actively involved in worshipping the calf: "He said to them, 'Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: Each of you put sword on thigh, go back and forth from gate to gate throughout the camp, and slay brother, neighbor, and kin.'" (Ex. 32, 27) One should not spare relatives or loved ones, all those guilty had to be killed.

Was Moses' face radiating light when he descended from Sinai the first time? There is no indication of it in the text. Only rage is displayed, and Moses has no time to teach anything to Israel. The second time around Moses begins the teaching of God's message, and only then is his face radiant. But, presumably the glow that his skin emitted from the encounter with God would have been there the first time around as well. Where was it in chapter 32?

Rabbi Arama interprets the veil as a means of suppressing emotions, such as anger. The greatness of Moses, he asserts, was that his intellectual and rational side was capable of control over his emotional side. The glow was there the first time, and it was the glow of anger. To me, it seems as if Moses was appalled by his own rage at the time of the calf. He goes back up to the mountain, and meets the Lord again, and during that time he decides that he must do something to control his emotions and his anger. The religious zeal that is such a major part of his revelatory experience needs to be controlled; otherwise he will always be inflicting violent solutions on every infraction of the law.

It seems to me that the veil is Moses' solution for himself, a way of masking or of walling off his own religious zealotry. When he is learning from the Lord, or when he is teaching Israel, his zeal and enthusiasm are under control of his reason and his intellect. But, when he is alone, stewing in what he perceives as lack of faith or lack of commitment by many to what he has been teaching, he needs to have some physical constraint that will prevent his anger from turning into rage, and from rage turning into incitement to violence. **TTT 130 M and K**

It is very difficult for people to control their anger, and it is even more difficult when that anger is fanned by the flames of religious zeal or religious self-righteousness. It is precisely at those times that a veil is necessary, when reason and intellect need to assert themselves, when the decisions about what to do need to be informed by intelligent analysis of Torah, and not by emotional forces that arise out of a feeling that one must be a "defender of the faith".

Moses makes a bold move. He knows that he needs to have some way to mitigate his feelings of zeal as a result of his own attachment to God and to Torah. In the light of angry and violent pronouncements by rabbis in the last few weeks, it becomes even more clear that a kind of veil is needed to maintain rationality. My uncle Aaron, known as Arky, was a great believer in rational and intellectual analysis of situations, so that in the end solutions that are not widely destructive be adopted. He would have liked the idea of the veil, and so do I.

**\*Ex. 35, 1 – 3**

*Moses then convoked the whole Israelite community and said to them:*

*These are the things that the LORD has commanded you to do: <sup>2</sup>On six days work may be done, but on the seventh day you shall have a sabbath of complete rest, holy to the LORD; whoever does any work on it shall be put to death. <sup>3</sup>You shall kindle no fire throughout your settlements on the sabbath day.*

At the end of parashat Ki-Tissa Moses goes into the Ohel Moed to speak with God. This causes his face to shine in such a way that he places a mask over it, so as not to alarm those who see him. At the end of this episode we are told that when Moses left the Ohel Moed that “he spoke to the children of Israel all that he was commanded” (asher yetzUveh) (Ex. 34:34). This is a very strange use of the verb TZVEH, in that it is the only time that it appears in the passive-reflexive form. Many times in the Torah where Moses transmits what God has told him the verb TZVEH appears, but in all those cases the verb is in the active form, this is what God commands. Only in this verse is there a sense that this is what Moses felt or understood that God had commanded. The difference is that this form of the Verb implies a subjective understanding of what was commanded.

This verbal usage spills light on a famous Talmudic passage “the one who performs a mitzvah because they are commanded (metzuveh), is greater than one who performs a mitzvah and is not commanded” (BK 38a, et al). Here too, the verb form can imply “one who feels commanded”. In that sense, the verse at the end of ki-tissa seems to imply that Moses did not pass on “everything” that he heard God tell him, but only those things which were compelling to him, those things that he felt were in particular obligations out of the whole. **TTT 131 HA and T and S**

There is an ongoing debate through the centuries on whether mitzvot should be kept out of a sense of relevance or meaning, or whether they should be kept out of a sense of obligation. This usage of “Metzuveh” seems to imply that the two go together and are the same. One feels obligated because one senses the relevance or meaning of the mitzvah. It is possible that in some cases the obligation IS the meaning, but in some cases the sense of obligation is derived from the meaning.

If that is the sense of the verse, what are the mitzvot which Moses “feels obligated to” and thus passes on to Israel? This we find out only in the continuation, namely the beginning of this week's parasha of Va-Yakhel. There are only three mitzvot which Moses “tells” Israel after leaving the Ohel Moed: Shabbat (Ex. 35:1-3), contributing money to the Mishkan (ibid. 4-9), contributing time and work to the Mishkan (ibid. 10-19). This is almost a description of congregational life. The three “main” mitzvot are Shabbat attendance, contributions through fund raising, and volunteering for synagogue life. Lest we think that this is very little, and that we are too modest in our needs, just look at Moses in this week's parasha.

**\*Ex. 35, 10 - 13**

*And let all among you who are skilled come and make all that the LORD has commanded: <sup>11</sup>the Tabernacle, its tent and its covering, its clasps and its planks, its bars, its posts, and its*

*sockets; <sup>12</sup>the ark and its poles, the cover, and the curtain for the screen; <sup>13</sup>the table, and its poles and all its utensils; and the bread of display;*

Parashat Va-Yakhel includes a repeat of the instructions to build the Tabernacle, and all of its vessels and appurtenances. One item has always fascinated me and it is what is traditionally known as “shewbread”, or in our modern translation, “the bread of display”: “the table, and its poles and all its utensils; and the bread of display” (Ex. 35, 13) In the first set of instructions about the Tabernacle we read: “And on the table you shall set the bread of display, to be before Me always.” (Ex. 25, 30)

I find the old translation which I learned as a youngster, “shewbread”, to be more mysterious and befitting rather than “bread of display”, which reminds me of those plastic deserts which one is shown in restaurants. So, the question is what is the purpose of this shewbread? The Torah specifies quantities of flour for its production, and that 12 loaves are to be set in two rows on a gold table. It is removed and eaten each Shabbat by the priests in purity, and then a new set is brought in for the next week.

I have a book which tries to reconstruct how the Tabernacle and its vessels looked. Unfortunately, there is no description of how the shewbread looked in the Torah. This book has them as round bagel like bread, six on a pole which emerges from the table, very much like how the bagel sellers in Israel keep their bagels. In the Talmud, the shewbread is described as “matzah avah”, that is unleavened bread a handbreath thick. It is forbidden to bake matzah that thick for Passover. (cf. **Pes. 36b-37a**)

But, my favorite description is that of Rashi. **Rashi** goes to great lengths, for him, to describe how the shewbread looked. Now, it is not too simple to understand his description, but it seems to me to be a kind of hamentasch!! That is, the ends are folded over leaving the middle open so that it looks the same from every side. (**on Ex. 25, 29**)

The Mishnah tells us that the shewbread is baked and then placed on a marble table, where it cools. Then it is placed on a gold table, and thus it never becomes moldy. Indeed, on Shabbat the last priest out cuts it into slices, and each priest of the watch takes a slice to eat with his meal. It is then also placed on a gold table outside of the chamber, “for one can raise sanctity higher, but one should not lower sanctity.” (Shekalim 6, 4)

There are many theories about the shewbread, but one is that it is a form of sacrifice which is presented to God. The mere fact of its presentation is a sign of its acceptability, and it does not have to be burned on the altar. Still, the priests do eat it with their meal, and since it is a week old, much is made of the need for the shewbread to remain free of mold.

A story in this regard has to do with Bet Garmu. This family were experts in baking the shewbread in such a manner that it did not become moldy. They refused to teach others how to do this. So, the sages sent to Alexandria for bread baking experts. Their shewbread was indeed beautiful, but it became moldy. When the sages saw this they were aghast, since this bread was before God, and thus needed to be



honorable. They asked Bet Garmu to return to work, but they only agreed to do this after their salary was doubled!

The sages asked them why they did not teach their art to others. "They said, our family tradition is that the Temple will be destroyed in the future and we did not want the secret to be out, so that shewbread would be made for idolatry." Furthermore, they were noted for the fact that the family never ever ate fine bread, so no one would say that Bet Garmu was feasting on shewbread. (**Tosefta Yoma 2, 5 et. al.**)

This story disparages the sages for their assumption that the reason Bet Garmu did not want to teach their art was purely financial. On the other hand, Bet Garmu knew their value. However, they also had other values in mind, and so, perhaps, the moral is that one should pay citizens more rather than try and do a job cheaply by bringing in foreign workers. At any rate, I remain fascinated by shewbread.

**\*Ex. 38, 18**

*<sup>18</sup>The screen of the gate of the enclosure, done in embroidery, was of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen. It was twenty cubits long. Its height – or width – was five cubits, like that of the hangings of the enclosure.*

\*This is dedicated to Judy Hollander, ztz"l. She was a light to all who knew her. No matter how one felt, just meeting Judy produced a lift of spirit from her smile and her warmth. She and Ben gave so much inspiration to people, and I particularly remember our visits to them in Yeroham, from which I always emerged with such admiration. The memory of her deeds will always be an inspiration and a blessing to be emulated.\*

At the end of this week's parasha we read about the screen which enclosed the courtyard of the Tabernacle. The screen is described thus: "The screen of the gate of the enclosure, done in embroidery ("maaseh rokem"), was of blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen ("tekhelet ve-argaman ve-tolaat shani ve shesh mashzar"). It was twenty cubits long." (Ex. 38, 18) The description is of an embroidered screen, where the embroidery is constituted by threads of various colors and fine linen. As with all other descriptions of the Tabernacle, the details of the embroidery and the threads used serves allegorical purposes in the Midrash.

One fascinating category of halakha has to do with mitzvot that have many parts to their performance. The halakhic question is what happens if one of those parts is missing? This is an halakhic question because the Torah does not specify whether or not the ritual may be performed if one component is missing. For example, the high priest is to wear 8 articles of clothing when performing public rituals. What if one part, say the vest, is left out. Is it permissible for the high priest to do the service without the vest? The term for this is "ikuv", that is, one part "holds back" the others, and "prevents" the performance of the mitzvah if it is not done whole. **TTT 132 HA**

Now, in some cases the absence of one part does not prevent one from fulfilling the mitzvah, but in other cases it does. In our case, all four threads used to embroider the screen of the Mishkan must be present. If one is absent, the screen cannot be used. (cf. **Tosefta Menahot 6, 11**) There may be many concrete reasons for this. The threads

were not only the color or pattern of the screen, but according to many interpretations they were used to create pictures so that the screen was decorated, kind of like a Goeblin tapestry. One suggestion, which we shall see later, is that these were pictures of wild flowers ("tzivoni") on the screen. Thus, it has been suggested that if any of the threads is missing that the picture created would not be complete, and the whole purpose of the mitzvah would not be fulfilled.

So, one answer to why the absence of one element of a mitzvah would prevent the whole mitzvah from being valid is that the purpose of the mitzvah might be missed altogether if all of the elements were not present. I want to suggest another approach, namely, that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Certainly in our case one could make the case that embroidered flowers on the screen could also be done without red thread or without the white thread of the flax. But, it should be clear that if one color is missing the whole effect would be quite different. Sometimes we are not aware enough of the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and what that really means is that if any part is missing, the whole will be different, it will not be the same.

The idea that the screen at the entrance to the Tabernacle was embroidered with flowers gives rise to a most beautiful and powerful Midrash on the verse "Awake, O north wind, Come, O south wind! Blow upon my garden, That its perfume may spread. Let my beloved come to his garden And enjoy its luscious fruits!" (Song 4, 16) The Midrash applies this text to the Tabernacle, upon its completion and being set up to be the place of meeting between God and Israel. The word "garden" denotes the Tabernacle. But, our Midrash asks: "What is the import of 'ganni'? ('my garden')? The answer is that it refers to 'My bridal chamber (genuni).'" (**Num. R. 13, 2**) The garden is a bridal chamber is the Tabernacle. This identity is based upon the embroidered screen: "As the bridal chamber is decorated with all kinds of flowers [or: colors, the Hebrew "tzivonin" means colors, but also can refer to flowers], so was the Tabernacle decorated with all kinds of flowers [or: colors], " blue, purple, and crimson yarns, and fine twisted linen ("tekhelet ve-argaman ve-tolaat shani ve shesh mashzar")" (Ex. 38, 18 and cf. 25, 4).

It is precisely the embroidery which enables the Midrash to view the Tabernacle as a bridal chamber, a place of meeting for the utmost intimacy, for the creation of a lasting bond and affection, and as such decorated for beauty and to celebrate the ceremony of coming together. Indeed, the Midrash continues to extract important lessons from the verse in Song of Songs: "The Torah, said R. Hunia, here teaches you a rule of etiquette; the bridegroom should not enter the bridal chamber until the bride gives him permission; hence it is first written, 'Let my beloved come into his garden' and afterwards, 'I am come into my garden.' (Song 5, 1)" The relationship demands manners and consideration. God does not come storming in, but waits for an invitation. So, the bridegroom must learn this rule of etiquette. **TTT 132 T**

This is not all. Our Midrash expands the importance and meaning of the metaphor of the Tabernacle as a bridal chamber for all humanity:

R. 'Azariah in the name of R. Judah b. R. Simon illustrated by means of a parable. A king was angry with his lady and drove her away and expelled her from his palace. After a time he sought to recall her. Said she: ' Let him give me some new token and then recall me.' Similarly, in times past Adam dwelt in the Garden of Eden in the

camp of the Shechinah. The Holy One, blessed be He, was angry with him and drove him from His private territory. When Israel went out of Egypt the Holy One, blessed be He, wished to restore them to His own immediate vicinity and told them to make for Him a Tabernacle so that He might dwell among them; as you read, And let them make Me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them, etc. (Ex. XXV, 8). Said Israel: 'Let the Holy One, blessed be He, give us some new token that He wishes to restore us to Himself.' What was the new token? In former times the Holy One, blessed be He, used to receive sacrifices on high, as it says, And the Lord smelled the sweet savour (Gen. VIII, 21), but now He will receive sacrifices here below. ....

The metaphor of the Tabernacle as huppah stresses the covenant, the partnership and intimacy of both sides of a marriage, but it also stresses the necessity for true partnership, and that neither side can behave highhandedly with the other. Not only that, but when God becomes angry and drives the 'partner' out of the house, there cannot be an automatic return without some change on the part of the one who was violent. The demand to hear something "new", as if saying "tell me something I have not heard before" is not only legitimate, but the relationship cannot be restored without it. Not only that, but this new thing must be not only words, but also actions.

#### **TTT 132 T and S**

This amazing Midrash makes the exodus from Egypt a major step in the relationship of God to humanity. It belongs to all humans, for although it is Israel who is redeemed, but they are redeemed as a sign and as a gesture for all humanity. It is God's first step in restoring his relationship with humanity after the expulsion from Eden. The saving of an oppressed and enslaved nation is the first step when God begins to reveal closeness to humanity that was disrupted by the first transgression, and never really repaired until that time. Still, Israel, representing humanity, has a right, maybe even a duty, to not just accept the offer, but demands that there be a clear sign and action on God's part that will make it clear that the return of intimacy will be real. The sign is that a Tabernacle will be built and people will bring sacrifices there that God will accept from that place! **TTT 132 U**

It seems to me that there are two aspects here. One is the sacrifices of thanksgiving which show that intimacy and real relationship can be restored if there is respect and acknowledgement of what the other has done for us, and the other aspect is that when a sin offering is brought, God signals that the person is accepted as they are. If God is portrayed as an aloof Being demanding total perfection, then it is clear why the relationship could not be restored. But, God finally decides that humans will continue to be brutal with one another, and that the best God can do is to make the possibility of redemption viable by providing a wondrous example of it. God then acts to redeem Israel, and this is God's way of signaling His preferences for humanity, and God then gives Israel the message that God can accept a contrite person down on the earth.

This Midrash views the Tabernacle as a metaphor of relationship. In addition, it places Israel's redemption and subsequent journey with God in a universal context. Finally, it promotes the view that conscience that motivates a person to atone and to strive for compassionate and caring relationships is the essence of getting closer to God. In all these ways, Judy Hollander ztz"l was a model for me, and for many people who knew her, of how to live with that sense day to day.

**\*Ex. 38, 21 - 22**

<sup>21</sup>These are the records of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of the Pact, which were drawn up at Moses' bidding – the work of the Levites under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest. <sup>22</sup>Now Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, had made all that the LORD had commanded Moses;

This week's portion ends not only the book of Exodus, but also the story of the building of the Tabernacle. The large amounts of raw materials brought by the nation as the stuff out of which the Tabernacle would be built is totaled up. The exact records of how much was collected and how much was utilized is presented for all to see: "These are the records of the Tabernacle, the Tabernacle of the Pact, which were drawn up at Moses' bidding – the work of the Levites under the direction of Ithamar son of Aaron the priest. Now Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, had made all that the LORD had commanded Moses" (Ex. 38:21-22)

Bezalel, son of Uri son of Hur is the craftsman and the artist who actually made, or, as in some Midrashim, taught others to make, or supervised the making of the Tabernacle. But, we have met him before. This is the third time that Bezalel is referred to with his full patronymic, a usage which is not common in the Torah. The commentary of **Baal ha-Turim** (Yaakov ben Asher) on this verse notes that these three citations represent the three qualities for which Bezalel is the paradigm, namely, wisdom, insight and knowledge ("hokhma, tevunah, ve-daat"). We usually associate Bezalel with artistry, which certainly includes those qualities, but is there more to Bezalel's character than this? Just what other qualities does this "wisdom" imply for our tradition?

Moses got the plans for the Tabernacle from God, he passed them on to Bezalel who implemented the plans. This seems to be the simple meaning of the end of verse 22: "[Bezalel] had made all that the LORD had commanded Moses". We know that God did not command Bezalel directly, so what is this verse saying? The Talmud Bavli, the Talmud Yerushalmi and the Midrash, note that the verse does NOT say that "[Bezalel] had made all that Moses had commanded him [Bezalel]", AND THIS IS WHAT IT SHOULD SAY. In reality, Moses commanded Bezalel. (**Berakhot 55a**) But, the biggest textual problem with this verse is that it is simply NOT TRUE. Bezalel does things that Moses did NOT say to him.

Rabbi Shemuel Bar Nahmani in the name of Rabbi Yonatan points out that this verse informs us precisely of Bezalel's "wisdom" and that his name is a direct expression of that wisdom. How so? God told Moses to make, in this order, a Tabernacle, ark and vessels. But, Moses turned the order around! Perhaps he was confused and excited by the incident of the golden calf. In any case, Moses told Bezalel to make, in this order, an ark, vessels, and a Tabernacle. Now, Bezalel could have just accepted Moses' word without question. This is, after all, Moses, the prophet who had spoken to God face to face, why should Bezalel not just take Moses' word for it?

What are the qualities in a person which would lead them to question Moses' word? According to our text that is exactly what he does!! Bezalel says to Moses: "Moses, our Rabbi, the logical way of the world is that first one builds a home, and

afterwards puts in the furniture. But, you tell me to build the ark and vessels and then the Tabernacle. Where shall I put the vessels I make until the Tabernacle is finished? Perhaps God really said to you a different order, Tabernacle, ark, vessels?" To this query Moses responds: "perhaps you were under God's shelter ("be-zel el") and knew what God intended?"

This is an astounding understanding of the transmission of God's word to Israel. One of the questions which most nags at us about revelation is the possibility of misunderstood communication. We all know the game wherein someone whispers a phrase to another person, and that person whispers to another and so on, until the last person says what they heard. That phrase is almost NEVER the same as it started. Is there any danger of such confusion with God's word? Even if we assume that Moses wrote down everything, here we have a case where Moses reversed the order! Bezalel's courage and willingness to question what was commonly accepted as the undisputed word of God, through the prophet, and his application to that word of human logic and research IN ORDER TO QUESTION IT are what makes Bezalel who he is, in the "shelter of God". IN THIS CASE IT IS LOGIC AND INQUIRY WHICH REVEAL GOD'S INTENTION, NOT THE TRANSMITTED WORD OF REVELATION! **TTT 133 HA and T and S and K**

What is most intriguing is the way the Talmud Yerushalmi dealt with this same textual problem. The Yerushalmi takes an even bolder approach to the question of Bezalel's initiatives (**Yer. Peah 3 side a**). The Yerushalmi starts from the same verse, but says simply that "even the things [which Bezalel did] which he did not hear from his teacher [Moses], was accepted just in the same manner as what was said to Moses on Sinai". There were other things that Bezalel did, such as the copper coverings for the boards, which Moses did not tell him at all. But, since they were the result of human "wisdom, insight and knowledge" they have the force of Divinely revealed rules.

The Yerushalmi then goes on to apply this same principal to another case, that of Joshua and Moses. R. Yohanan in the name of R. Banay quotes Joshua 11:15, which includes the same phraseology as our verse "[Joshua] did not deviate from all that the LORD had commanded Moses." They apply the same inference to this case, namely, even though Joshua did things OTHER than what Moses had commanded him, those things are really what God intended.

What was it that Joshua did that was NOT in accord with Moses' charge to him? He did not carry out the Herem to kill every man, woman and child in Canaan! After Jericho and Ai, Joshua stops the killing. Even though he could have carried out this command against the Gibeonites, for a treaty arrived at by trickery is legally void, still he kept the treaty, which meant abandoning Moses' specific words. It is this decision which comes in for praise in the Yerushalmi. **TTT 133 HA and T and S and K**

There is danger in such an approach. There is danger in calling into question the "certainty" of the word of God delivered by Moses. These texts, however, set out conditions under which such inquiry should be held. One cannot call transmitted revelation into question only on the grounds of preference or whim or of changing times. But, our Talmudic tradition embraces the idea of learned and responsible inquiry using human wisdom, insight and knowledge to critically examine the

received tradition. But, even more than that it embraces the idea that when this examination reaches the conclusion that the received tradition must change, not only is that permitted, but THAT CHANGE ITSELF becomes part of God's revelation at Sinai. The change is not an aberration which at best should be tolerated, but it becomes an inherent part of the revelation just as if it was uttered at Sinai. **TTT 133 HA and T and S and K**

**\*Ex. 39, 33**

*<sup>33</sup>Then they brought the Tabernacle to Moses, with the Tent and all its furnishings: its clasps, its planks, its poles, its posts, and its sockets;*

Towards the end of parashat Pekudei "the Mishkan is brought to Moshe" (Ex. 39:33). Many midrashim try to enunciate the importance and meaning of this act. Why is the Mishkan brought to Moshe? Could it not just be erected where it was? Could not Moshe have gone to the place where the Mishkan was being built?

One Midrash (Ex. R. 52:5) connects this episode with the verse from Shir ha-Shirim 3:11: "Go out and see, daughters of Zion, king Solomon, in his crown which his mother adorned him with on his wedding day, the day of his hearts rejoicing". The midrash states that this verse was recited on the day the Mishkan was erected in that there was great rejoicing in Israel that God's presence, the Shekhina, infused them. The midrash likens bringing the Mishkan to Moses as a kind of wedding crown being prepared for Israel and God.

This image, in itself, is interesting. But, what is the relationship between God, Israel and Moses which is implied here? Who is the mother who adorns the groom with a wedding crown? Who is the groom, and who the bride?

At one point, it is assumed that Israel is the mother who adorns the crown for the groom, God. R. Shimon b. Yohai asks R. Elazar Be-Rabbi Yossi if he had heard from his father an explanation of why Israel is called the "mother" of the Kadosh Baruch Hu? He answers with a parable. A king who had an only daughter, and he was too fond of her and called her "my daughter" (bitti, see Ps. 45:11). He did not waiver from his love until he called her "my sister" (ahotti, see Song of Songs 5:2). He did not waiver from his love until he called her "my mother" (immi, see Isa. 51:4, "u-le-ummi" is read "u-le-immi").

The parable spells out a fascinating progression of relationships between Israel and God. At all stages Israel is beloved of God. In the first stage as a daughter, who is beloved, but is dependent upon God and who must relate out of obeisance and respect. Then, Israel is more like a sister, who is also beloved, but is more of an equal supportive relationship. Finally, Israel is like a mother, who is not only equal but whom God must also respect. There seems to be a sense in this Midrash that the relationship of God to Israel can be mutually supportive, have mutual honor and duties. The Mishkan, in this sense is a symbol of Israel as a community which is tied to God by mutual love, mutual respect and mutual responsibility. **TTT 134 T**

It is this kind of relationship which is best for our own communities. A kind of mutuality of parenting. It seems the best way to have God's presence dwell among us.

**\*Ex. 40, 33b - 38**

*When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the Lord rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys.*

Parashat Pekudei ends the book of Exodus. After God's revelation and the giving of the Torah at Sinai, we read of the making of the golden calf. This stormy period gives way to long and detailed chapters concerned with building the Tabernacle and all of the priestly duties surrounding it. It is a period which seems to be calm and without inner strife. Israel is fully employed, building and working for a common goal, to make the Tabernacle and prepare the priests for serving there. God, continues to give directions to Moses about how to construct and finish the project.

The end of Exodus tells us: "When Moses had finished the work, the cloud covered the Tent of Meeting, and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it and the Presence of the Lord filled the Tabernacle. When the cloud lifted from the Tabernacle, the Israelites would set out, on their various journeys; but if the cloud did not lift, they would not set out until such time as it did lift. For over the Tabernacle a cloud of the Lord rested by day, and fire would appear in it by night, in the view of all the house of Israel throughout their journeys." (Ex. 40:33b-38)

The end of Exodus seems full of hope. The Tabernacle is finished and the Presence of the Lord, in the form of a cloud, fills it. The cloud guides Israel on its journeys through the desert. But wait!! There is a jarring note in this idyllic setting, a note that causes trepidation in the hearts of the reader: "Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, because the cloud had settled upon it" (v.35). If Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting, how was he to speak with God? How was there to be communication between God and Moses? Was Moses being locked out of Divine revelation? Was the sacrificial service of the Tabernacle meant to totally replace communication with God through speech and Torah?

These difficulties were felt by the Midrash, which connects this ending of Exodus with the first verse of Leviticus: "va-yikra el Moshe, va-yeddaber Adonai eilav mei-ohel moed leimor", "The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying" (Lev. 1:1). We stop reading Exodus, go home, and only later do we continue reading Leviticus. But, the Midrash wants us to see that the first verse of Leviticus is a direct response to the troubling questions at the end of Exodus. The answer is: No, God does not mean to end communication with Moses and Israel. (see **Sifra, Beraita de-R. Ishmael, 1:8**, see also a later Hasidic use of this materiel: " 'Moses could not enter the Tent of Meeting' and right after that, 'The Lord called to Moses and spoke to him from the Tent of Meeting, saying'!! " (**Sefer Maor va-Shemesh, R. Kalonymus Kalman Epstein**) )

Not only that, but the Midrash sees that there are different levels of communication between God and man, and these levels are signified by the words used in the first

verse of Leviticus: "va-yikra" "called"; "va-yeddaber" "spoke", "leimor" "saying". Each one of these words connotes a different kind of communication, and a different level of human initiative in the revelation. (This is a fascinating topic, but too large to go on here).

Perhaps, at first, Moses "could not enter the Tent of Meeting" on his own, but when God "called him" "va-yikra", he could enter it. (cf. Sifra ibid.) Furthermore, the Midrash notes that elsewhere Moses did enter on his own, without being called, to seek revelation from God. "When Moses went into the Tent of Meeting to speak with Him..." (Num. 7:89). **Ramban (on Ex. 40:34)** makes it clear (quoting our Sifra passage) that Hazal understood this verse to mean that Moses went to seek communication with God, on his own, without being "called".

In the terms of our story we can say, that the communication with God was not replaced by the Tabernacle, perhaps there was only a temporary recess. This recess is signified, not only by the words at the end of Exodus, but also by the fact that the resumption of God's call is after the intermission of the end of a book and the beginning of the next one. The Midrash also strives to understand the intermission. "What purpose do the intermissions ("hafsakot") serve?", asks the Midrash (**Sifra, De-borei de-nedava, 1**). This is a striking question. Why don't we keep reading without stop? Is there a purpose to the intermissions between one Divine encounter and the next? Why did God not give all the laws without recess?

The answer is astounding. "To give Moses time and ease to reflect on what he heard, from parasha to parasha and from matter to matter" (Sifra, ibid.) No matter that Moses had heard these laws directly from God, he needed time to reflect upon them, to consider them, to make them understood to himself and to Israel. The process of Oral Torah, of study of God's word, is implicit in the intermissions!

No one can just accept the text as it is, even if heard directly from God, without studying it and reflecting on it. The Midrash there makes this point clear: "the lesson is logically clear ("kal va-homer"), if someone who heard the words from the mouth of God, and who spoke with the Holy Spirit [Moses] needed to reflect on them from parasha to parasha and from matter to matter, how much more so do us simple Jews need to reflect on it." **TTT 135 T and HA**

Man's autonomous thought and reflection on God's word is an essential part of the process of Torah. We cannot just "take the Torah" as it is, without studying it and reflecting on it in our minds and hearts, to make it our own in a very personal way. The quiet reflective times between the sounds of revelation are as much a part of the revelation as the words themselves.