

# A TIME OF REFLECTION

by Shlomo Katz

## Parshas Shemos

### A Time of Reflection

Midrash Rabbah records that, while Moshe lived in Pharaoh's palace as a young man, he convinced Pharaoh that slaves work more efficiently when they are given one day of rest each week. Pharaoh instructed Moshe to implement this idea, and Moshe arranged for Bnei Yisrael to have Shabbat as a day off.

At the end of the parashah we read that Pharaoh decreed (5:9), "Let the work be heavier upon the men and let them engage in it; and let them not pay attention to false words." Midrash Rabbah explains that Bnei Yisrael used to gather on Shabbat to read scrolls that had been passed down from their ancestors, in which it was written that they would be redeemed in the merit of Shabbat observance. Therefore Pharaoh proclaimed: Take away their day of rest so that they will not have time to dream of freedom.

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato z"l (Ramchal; 1707-1747) observes that the yetzer hara uses the same strategy to distract a person from focusing on his task in this world. Man's task is to reflect upon every step he wishes to take and every action he wishes to perform and to ask himself: Will this step or action bring me closer to G-d or will it distance me from G-d? The yetzer hara knows that if man would merely think about his actions, he would certainly begin to regret his deeds, Ramchal writes. To prevent this, the yetzer hara makes sure that we are always busy with all types of activities and tasks that appear to be very pressing. (Mesilat Yesharim ch.2)

In this light, perhaps we can understand why Shabbat observance, in particular, brings the redemption closer, for it gives us the opportunity and the peace of mind to reflect on our purpose in the world and the need to become a nation that merits redemption.

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*"Come, let us outsmart it [the Jewish People] . . ." (1:10)*

R' Shlomo Amar shlita (Sephardic Chief Rabbi of Israel) writes: By using the word "outsmart," the Torah is telling us that all of the know-how of the mighty Egyptian nation was devoted to overpowering Bnei Yisrael. Imagine! Since Pharaoh decreed that "every boy" that is born should be drowned, he must have believed he had the ability to carry out that decree. Even today, when births are recorded in a computerized official registry--when hospitals, birthing centers and midwives are regulated by the government--the government still cannot know about every child that is born. Yet, Moshe Rabbeinu's mother Yocheved was able to hide Moshe at first only because he was born prematurely. Once his due date arrived, she felt unable to hide her baby son any longer. Certainly, this righteous woman--indeed, any normal mother--would not have left her son in a basket on the river if she had any other choice.

R' Amar concludes: King Shlomo teaches (Mishlei 21:30), "There is neither wisdom nor understanding nor counsel against Hashem." By reflecting on the planning that went into Pharaoh's plot and recognizing that it was not a half-baked scheme but rather a comprehensive plan to destroy Bnei Yisrael, we can better appreciate that even so, it was no match for Hashem's wisdom. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Mi'yamim Yamimah p.104)

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*"Pharaoh commanded his entire people, saying, 'Every son that will be born -- you shall throw into the River, and every daughter you shall keep alive!'" (1:22)*

R' Yekutiel Yehuda Halberstam z"l (1905-1994; Klausenberger Rebbe) asks: Why does the Torah report the last part of Pharaoh's decree, "And every daughter you shall keep alive"? Is the Torah coming to praise his humanitarianism?

R' Halberstam answers: The Torah reports that Pharaoh planned to keep the girls alive because that was part of his evil plot. Pharaoh didn't know that a child born of a Jewish mother and a non-Jewish father is halachically Jewish. He thought that keeping the girls alive to marry Egyptians would increase the Egyptian population.

In the Pesach Haggadah, we quote this verse and exclaim, "This is our burden." Understandably, the decree to kill Jewish boys was a burden, but why was the decree to keep alive the daughters a "burden"? In light of the above, R' Halberstam notes, it is clear. The intent of the decree was to take away our daughters and marry them to Egyptians. The Haggadah is teaching that the searing pain that Bnei Yisrael felt at the prospect of this intermarriage served as a merit that hastened their redemption. (Haggadah Shel Pesach Halichot Chaim p.221)

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*"The woman conceived and gave birth to a son; she saw that he was good and she hid him for*

*three months." (2:2)*

R' Menachem di Lonzano z"l (Eretz Yisrael; late 16th-early 17th centuries) asks: How is it that sometimes, just by looking at a person, we can sense whether he is a good person or a bad person? He explains:

It is axiomatic that G-d has no physical form. Nevertheless, we speak of G-d's Attributes in terms such as His "Hand," His "Mouth," His "Back," etc. The reason is that G-d formed our bodies in a way that would permit us to understand a little bit about Him. [Ed. note: Not as is commonly understood, that we speak of His Hand by analogy to our hands; to the contrary, He gave us hands so that we can understand a little about His Attribute called "Hand."] Similarly, all of man's limbs allude to Divine secrets. This is why the number of man's limbs corresponds to the number of mitzvot.

R' Menachem continues: Halachah requires a person to tear his clothes when a close relative dies and also when he sees a sefer Torah being burned. What do a person and a sefer Torah have in common? Each is made up of parts that have no holiness or special significance--parchment and ink, in the Torah's case; blood, bones, flesh and hair, in the human's case. In both cases, when all the parts are combined, they form something for which Hashem has great love. This is why, R' Menachem continues, a person who dreams about a sefer Torah is really seeing a dream about a person. For example, dreaming about a sefer Torah being removed from the aron kodesh may foretell the birth of a son, and so on.

In short, man's body is a reflection of the Divine and, thus, is a reflection of his soul, which our Sages call, "a piece of the Divine." [Obviously, the soul is not itself Divine.] This is why sometimes, just by looking at a person, we can sense what traits are contained within his soul, as we read (Yeshayah 3:9), "Their brazen countenance testifies against them," and (Kohelet 8:1), "A man's wisdom lights up his face." (Derech Chaim: Introduction)

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*"They replied, 'An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds, and he even drew water for us and watered the sheep'." (2:19)*

R' Kalman Winter z"l (rabbi of Southeast Hebrew Congregation-Knesset Yehoshua in Silver Spring, Maryland; passed away 8 Marcheshvan of this year) observed: Moshe Rabbeinu was not an "Egyptian" man. The simple explanation is that Yitro's daughter mistook Moshe for an Egyptian. However, R' Winter noted, the midrash gives a deeper explanation: The "Egyptian man" refers not to Moshe, but to the Egyptian whom Moshe had killed and buried in the sand in Egypt. The Torah is highlighting the chain of events that led Moshe to rescue Yitro's daughters. Moshe killed the Egyptian who was beating a Jew. Pharaoh heard about this and tried to execute Moshe. Moshe fled from Pharaoh, which brought him to the well in Midian. Because he was there, he was able to save

Yitro's daughters. Indirectly, all this can be traced back to the Egyptian overseer. [This teaches that Hashem looks not only at our deeds but also at their consequences, even at the fact that a bad deed can have a good consequence or a good deed can have a bad consequence.] (R' Winter, in a hesped for his father 17 Adar II 5768)

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## Letters from Our Sages

The letter below was written by R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (1895-1974). Reb Chatzkel, as he is popularly known, was mashgiach ruchani of the Mir yeshiva in pre-war Poland and in Shanghai, China during World War II. After the Holocaust, he lived briefly in New York and then settled in Yerushalayim. In later years, he served as mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. This letter is printed in Ohr Yechezkel: Michtavim, no. 20. Reb Chatzkel was particularly renowned for mining the story of the Exodus for lessons in emunah / faith, as this letter demonstrates.

Monday night of Beshalach, 5699 [1939], in Mir. Much blessing and peace to my dear friend, Rabbi . . .

After inquiring of your welfare with love:

I received your precious letter. I was extremely pleased that you wrote to me that you bring people close to yirat Shamayim / awe of Heaven. Of course, if one is able to speak with [i.e., influence] other people, one should devote time to this. However, my friend, vigilance is required so that a person doesn't forget the most important thing, i.e., to strengthen oneself first, as I have heard [about the mishnah in Pirkei Avot, ch.5], "Moshe was meritorious and influenced others to be meritorious"--the first thing is to be meritorious, and only then should one influence others to be meritorious.

We spoke recently [presumably, in yeshiva] about the fact that a person must be a truth-seeker, one who chooses life, as it is written (Devarim 30:19), "You shall choose life!" The only choice that is within a person's ability is whether to choose good or, G-d forbid, bad. A person does not control his destination, but, if he chooses good and truth, then Hashem will be with him to lead him on the path he has chosen for himself. Please, my friend, look at the commentary of Rabbeinu Yonah [z"l] on Pirkei Avot, chapter 4, mishnah 2 [teaching that the more mitzvot one does, the easier it is to do even more mitzvot].

We also said that a person should not become excited when he sees that he is attaining wisdom without being a person who chooses and seeks only truth. Truth does not come from wisdom, and it [wisdom without truth] may be to a person's detriment, for Hashem reveals truth only to those who seek truth. In this regard, I cited the verses [in this week's parashah--4:22-23], "So said Hashem, 'My firstborn son is Israel . . . Behold, I shall kill your firstborn son.'" Pharaoh was warned about the last plague first because it was the worst. Hashem is above all in His power and no one can escape His Hand except through repentance. Even great and harsh events cannot bring a person to truth and repentance unless he on a level where he is fit to repent. . . The same is true of wisdom; if a person is

not ready to recognize truth, wisdom will not help him attain truth . . .

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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