

# A LEADER'S EMERGENCY CHORD

*by Rabbi Yitzchok Adlerstein*

## A Leader's Emergency Chord <sup>1</sup>

The last pasuk of the Torah amounts to a peculiar epitaph for Moshe. Rashi sees references to his physically receiving the luchos from Hashem, his role in the wondrous miracles in the wilderness, and his breaking of the luchos upon seeing Bnei Yisrael dancing in front of the Golden Calf. It seems initially to be a strange and incomplete summation of Moshe's illustrious career, made stranger yet by including his smashing of the luchos on the short list - and apparently the crowning, ultimate one - of his accomplishments. Moreover, the need for this summary is itself perplexing. The Torah serves primarily as a manual of instruction to us, guiding us in important life issues. Of what value is it to us for the Torah to choose these three activities as the defining elements of Moshe's leadership? <sup>2</sup>

We begin answering the question by posing a different question. "Never again has there arisen in Israel a prophet like Moshe, whom Hashem had known face to face."<sup>3</sup> How can speaking "face to face" jibe with the Torah's insistence elsewhere <sup>4</sup>that "no human can see My face and live?"

These verses do not conflict with each other, because they describe different phenomena. No human indeed can "see" Hashem. The face to face knowing can be understood in the context of Moshe's special midah of da'as, meaning the ability to cling to Hashem. (This meaning of da'as parallels the first usage of the word, "And Adam knew/ yada his wife Chavah.")<sup>5</sup>

Moshe succeeded in maintaining absolute connection with Hashem, of not allowing for a lapse in that connection for an instance. Moreover, part of his avodah was relating this devekus to Bnei Yisrael in a way that would penetrate to their core and make it part of them. He did this by demonstrating how people could remain constant in their devekus, how all situations and conditions offered ways to stay attached to Him. No set of circumstances, no matter how difficult or lowly, precludes devekus.

We have thus arrived at an explanation of the Torah's last pesukim, which can be understood as an inventory of the extremes of the human condition in relation to devekus. At times, a Jew can easily sense the greatness of the Creator. Other times do not lend themselves to such feelings; instead what he senses is his own lowliness. Devekus, though, is possible at all times.

"All the signs and wonders that Hashem sent him [Moshe] to perform in the land of Egypt." Trapped

and mired in Egypt both physically and spiritually, we were at the nadir of our history as a people. Moshe succeeded in lifting our spirits, and inspiring us to the point of devekus. (This dovetails with the Torah's explanation of Hashem's orchestrating the dramatic and wondrous events at the crossing of the Reed Sea. The Torah writes, "And Egypt will know that I am Hashem."<sup>6</sup> On the level of interpretation that the word "know" alludes to devekus, what relevance does it have to the Egyptians? The Degel Machaneh Ephraim explains that the reference to Egypt and Egyptians should be understood as the Egyptian-like qualities that had become part of our lives at that time. Moshe's devekus was so deep and profound, that he was able to implant some of it within us, even at a time that our spiritual fabric was threadbare.

The "strong Hand" of the next verse refers to Moshe's role at Sinai. There we stood at the polar opposite point on a spiritual continuum. It was our greatest moment of triumph, and we achieved, once again through the stewardship of Moshe, our deepest experience of devekus ever. We connected with Hashem so deeply that we were able to fathom the real meaning of Hashem's Oneness. "You have been shown in order to know that Hashem, He is your G-d. There is none besides Him."<sup>7</sup> The last phrase pithily conveys the outer limits of what Man can know - and only considerable effort - about the nature of G-d's Oneness.<sup>8</sup> It is significant - and anticipated by our thesis in this piece! - that the verb we find in this verse is "know," once again alluding to devekus.

The next phrase, "and awesome power," refers to the miracles that sustained us throughout the years of travels in the wilderness. The Torah describes it as a place of "snakes, fiery serpents, and scorpions;"<sup>9</sup> metaphorically we understand those to allude to the most potent and formidable forces of tumah that Man is forced to encounter. Here, too, Moshe instilled in Bnei Yisrael the recognition that within the tension and struggle with the countervailing forces to kedushah, Man could still find devekus.

The Torah saves Moshe's greatest accomplishment for the end. The luchos were "G-d's handiwork, and the script was the script of G-d."<sup>10</sup> Can anyone - even Moshe - "break" a Divinely-created article? We must understand that the luchos represented the bond between Hashem and Klal Yisrael; breaking them meant severing that bond. Moshe communicate in that frightful act, and without the benefit of words, that the element of specialness that Hashem had bestowed upon His people had been removed. The relationship was over. For this reason the Torah emphasizes, "before the eyes of all Israel." Moshe needed a way to to impress them with a message, and he had only seconds in which to try. He found it in the breaking of the luchos,

This says a great deal about Moshe. What Moshe saw when he descended from the top of Sinai would have overwhelmed a lesser leader, and led him to despair of any remedy for his people. Moshe saw a people not only guilty of a heinous crime, but gleeful in celebratory dancing. What words of rebuke could he bring to a people fully satisfied with itself?

Moshe broke the luchos. With this he broke their hearts, which was fully his intention. Broken-hearted, they could begin to travel back on the long road of teshuvah. (Note that Hashem refers to them as "your people" and "the people," until the effects of Moshe's action set in. When "the people heard the bad tiding and ... became grief-stricken," <sup>11</sup> the Torah resumes referring to them by their more honorable title of Bnei Yisrael.) The success of that teshuvah would hinge on the degree of brokenness they felt, which in turn hinged on how aware they were of the enormity of their crime.

This was Moshe's finest hour as a teacher of devekus. Where others would have given up in futility or helplessness, Moshe knew exactly what to do to rescue his people, and to help them regain devekus lost. We would not be here today were it not for that lesson.

The Torah's messages are always for all times. Here, in this final verse and in its final mesasage, the Torah emphasizes to us that every person can find a way to attach him- or herself to Hashem in each and every condition and situation that he find himself in.

As the Torah ends, so is its beginning. Bereishis can be read as beis - reishis. Two very different paths stand before us in our pursuit of our desired goal. They are shomayim and aretz, heaven and earth. A person can motivate himself to move ahead through reflecting upon the Heavens - upon the lofty grandeur of Hashem. Understanding eretz, earthliness, will take him there as well. Honest recognition of our own smallness and insignificance can easily become our greatness. <sup>12</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Nesivos Shalom pgs. 226-229

<sup>2</sup> They are not presented to instruct us in some moral lesson implicit in those incidents, since they were fully described by the Torah earlier. Rating them as the "top three" doesn't seem to teach us anything.

<sup>3</sup> Devarim 34:10

<sup>4</sup> Shemos 20:33

<sup>5</sup> Bereishis 4:1

<sup>6</sup> Shemos 14:4

<sup>7</sup> Devarim 4:35

<sup>8</sup> Da'as Tevunos of the Ramchal essentially turns this phrase into the central motif of his sefer - and the goal of the unfolding of history!

<sup>9</sup> Devarim 8:15

<sup>10</sup> Shemos 32:16

<sup>11</sup> Shemos 33:4

<sup>12</sup> The Kotzker used to say, "Nothing is as whole as a broken heart."

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