

THE CONVERSION FACTOR

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

The first four Parshios of Sefer Shemos (Book of Exodus) record the story of the Exodus. The remaining seven Parshios in Sefer Shemos record the giving of the Torah, the sin of the Golden Calf, and the building of the Mishkan (tabernacle). From the first moment of Moshe's assignment at the Burning Bush, G-d said that the purpose of the Exodus was to give the Jews His Torah. (3:12) "When you take the people out of Egypt you will serve G-d on this mountain."

(It follows logically that if the purpose of the Exodus was Revelation than the purpose of the 210 years of enslavement was also Revelation. Revelation had to happen to a nation, not an individual. Enslavement, persecution, and the ghetto of Goshen guaranteed that the "family of 70" would become the nation of 3 million.)

Even though the main focus of Sefer Shemos is the giving of the Torah, a study of the nation's evolution from slavery to freedom to willful acceptance of G-d's law will treat us to greater insights into who and what the Jewish people is intended to be as G-d's Chosen Nation.

The children of Avraham and Sarah were chosen for a reason. They were chosen to continue Avraham's work of teaching the world about G-d. "Through you and your children will be blessed all the families of Earth." Not only were the Jews expected to present G-d as the Exclusive Creator and Maintainer of the Universe but they were also expected to model for the other nations the type of behavior expected from the creature "made in His form and image."

In its simplest sense, G-d created the human creature to emulate His Chesed, His giving. G-d needs nothing and needed nothing. G-d was, is, and will forever be the source of all that is. He is the non-corporal, all encompassing, everlasting, Almighty. Therefore, humans were created, not for G-d's sake but for their own sake. As such, the act of our creation was an act of kindness in the truest sense of the word. We can never repay G-d for G-d does not need anything in return; therefore, G-d's creating the universe was to provide the mortal, limited, human with the opportunity of doing "good." If the human does "good" he or she will be rewarded. Therefore, all of existence was created and designed by G-d, including the challenge of evil, in order to give us the opportunity of doing "good" and earning reward.

(*Obviously, we can only deserve reward if doing so demands effort on our part. That is where the challenge of evil enters onto the stage of human history.)

What does it mean to "do good?" Doing good means emulating G-d Who is the source of all

goodness.

Keep in mind that the Exclusive Creator and Maintainer of the Universe needs nothing. It is His universe and the game of life is played by His rules. Those rules (the Torah) cannot be the formulation of our humanistic thinking or assumed morality. The rules must be the construct of G-d's thinking and morality. Otherwise, it is we, the puny, mortal, and limited human creature that become the arbitrators of good and evil and the occasions for reward and punishment. That in turn confines G-d to the limits of our moral analysis and judicious intellect. That cannot be. Therefore, the meaning of good and evil must emanate from G-d Himself.

What is "doing good?" Doing good means emulating G-d Who is the source of all goodness by doing acts of Chesed - kindness. Just as G-d always relates to the universe with Chesed - kindness, so too must we relate to the world around us with giving and selflessness.

Rav Dessler presents an analysis of human social interaction by dividing between Givers, Takers, and Receivers.

Givers are steeped in Chesed and do their best to relate to all others through selfless giving. They are the righteous who attempt to emulate the ways of G-d. Givers are fundamentally humble in their view of the world. They understand that their mission in life is to serve the world and all it contains.

Takers are self-centered, expecting that all others will give to them regardless of their own selfishness. The Takers of society are fundamentally arrogant in their thinking assuming that the world and all it contains was created to serve them.

The problem with the social equation of Givers and Takers is what happens when one Giver gives to another Giver. Inevitably the Giver becomes a Taker. Yet, we have defined the Taker as fundamentally arrogant, self-centered, and flawed. Therefore, Rav Dessler added the category of Receiver.

The Receiver receives from other Givers what they wish to give and in return reasserts his role as a Giver by saying "thank you." Expressing appreciation converts every act of receiving into an act of giving.

It stands to reason that if the job of the Jew is to emulate G-d Who is the ultimate example of selfless giving by doing acts of Chesed - kindness - selfless giving, than showing appreciation and saying thank you whenever possible is central to accomplishing our mission.

The Medresh tells us that Pharaoh banked on this fundamental Jewish trait when he enslaved the Jews. Because the children of Yakov were raised to be "Baalei Chesed - doers of kind deeds and expressers of appreciation," the Jews were the first to respond to Pharaoh's call for volunteers. (The Medresh says that Pharaoh initiated a national work force to build for the glory of Egypt. He himself joined the initial effort and wore a golden brick around his neck) What better way to express their appreciation to Pharaoh and Egypt for their gracious hospitality of 100 years? Once the Jewish

population had rallied around the work banner of Pharaoh's nationalism they were caught like flies to sticky paper. The next thing they knew they had been reduced to slaves and second-class citizens.

The first three plagues recorded in this week's Parsha were, blood, frogs, and lice. In each instance G-d instructed Moshe to have Aharon perform the actual plague. (7:19 & 8:12). Rashi references the Medresh in both instances that explains why Moshe could not call into effect the actual plagues of blood, frogs, and lice. (7:19) "Because the River had protected Moshe when he had been cast afloat in it, Moshe could not smite the Nile, neither to turn it into blood nor to bring forth the frogs." (8:12) "The earth did not deserve to be hit by Moshe because it had protected Moshe when he killed the Egyptian overseer and hid his body in the sand."

In my years teaching high school, students would often challenge the "concrete" nature of these Medrashim. "Does the earth really care? Would the Nile's feelings have been hurt? Why suggest something so ridiculous as attributing human feelings to nature and the universe?"

The truth of the matter is that the students were correct in their concrete approach to Medrashik metaphor; however, Torah is intended to be practiced concretely as well as symbolically. From a concrete perspective, expressing sensitivity and appreciation for the unthinking and unfeeling Nile River or Mother Earth is ridiculous. However, symbolically, Moshe's non- participation in the actualization of the three plagues of blood, frogs, and lice is profoundly important.

How does the Torah "look back" on our 210 years in Egypt? (Divarim 23:8) "Do not reject an Egyptian for you were a sojourner in his land." Rashi explains, "Even though they threw the male children into the river. Why? Because Mitzrayim (Egypt) provided Yakov and his family with hospitality and safety when it was necessary." What an amazing law! We must accept an Egyptian's conversion to Judaism because we owe Egypt a debt of gratitude for the welcome they provided Yakov and his family when they escaped the famine and settled in Egypt! Forget the years of estrangement, slavery, and persecution! Forget the debasement and fear! However, remember that they gave you safety when you needed it! How great and pleasant are the ways of G-d! What else should be expected of a nation destined to bring blessing to the families of man? Appreciation converts Receiving to Giving and appreciation embraces hatred and revenge and converts in into acceptance and kindness!

In last week's Parsha the verse stated, "And a new King arose over Egypt who did not know Yoseph." Rashi referenced the Gemara in Sotah 11a. "Rav and Shmuel, one says that it was a new king and the other says that it was the same king with new decrees." My Grandfather Zt'l analyzed the basis for the argument. What difference did it make whether the king was new or that he was the old king with new decrees? The end was still the same enslavement and persecution!

My Grandfather explained that Rav and Shmuel were arguing about human nature. The one who said that it was a "new king" did not believe that an individual could be such an ingrate as to entirely ignore and deny the kindness of another. Therefore, it was impossible that it was the same King who

had benefited from Yoseph's goodness. The king had to be a new king that did not feel indebted to Yoseph or the Jews.

The other opinion was that human nature is such that a person can and will outwardly deny a debt of gratitude if it is to his benefit. Therefore the king was the same king who had benefited from Yoseph but he changed his attitude, rewrote the history books, and paid back goodness with evil by issuing decrees against the Jewish people. My Grandfather concluded that the reason why the Talmud recorded the argument between Rav and Shmuel was to teach us the extent to which a human could fall from the ideal intended by G-d and the extent to which we must be vigilant in showing appreciation rather than denying it. Instead of Pharaoh showing appreciation he acted in a way that proclaimed loud and clear, (4:2) "Who is this G-d that I should listen to His voice to release the Jews from bondage? I do not know this G-d and I will not send out the Jews!" Pharaoh's denial was far more than denying Yoseph's goodness, it denied the essence of Who G-d is and the manner through which He relates to the universe!

This week's Parsha continues the confrontation between two antithetical personalities and philosophies. On one side there was the arrogant, self-centered, egotistical, ingrate, Pharaoh King of Egypt. On the other side was Moshe: humble, giving, selfless, and appreciative. Pharaoh hardened his heart, denied his debt of gratitude to G-d and Israel, and made his nation suffer for the sake of his pride. Moshe opened his heart to the plight of his brothers, extended himself to fight on their behalf even against G-d Himself (5:22), showed his appreciation for the goodness of G-d and the universe He created and maintains, and brought glory and wonder to the G-d and nation he served.

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The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.