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**The Lower East Side
Parshat HaShavua sheet**

A collection of Divrei Torah from around the Internet

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Parshat Bo
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Latest time for Kriyat Sh'ma – 9:40

OY VEY!

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

“Don’t get mad,” say some contemporary philosophers, “get even.”

I am not sure if the objective of the ten plagues was for the Almighty to get even with the nation that had enslaved His people. Certainly there are Midrashic sources that correlate the ten plagues as direct punishment for Egyptian crimes against the Jewish people. (*Tana D’bei Eliyahu Chapter 7*) So perhaps we might say that the Jewish people got even.

There is, however, no scriptural reference to the fact that they got mad. In fact, each time Moshe went to Pharaoh a serene and calculated negotiation occurred. “Let My people serve Me,” Moshe commanded. When Pharaoh refused his obstinence was met with a clear and calculated threat. “If you refuse to allow the people to leave, I will send the following plague in your land.” And so it went. Sometimes a plague immediately followed a warning, other times plagues came with no warning at all. When Pharaoh found Moshe and arranged for a cessation of the scourge, Pharaoh reneged on his commitment soon after. Moshe became frustrated, perhaps he even became impatient, but there was no anger until the final plague. Then, he not only got even, he got mad.

Moshe warned Pharaoh with the words of Hashem, “At about midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt and every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die.” ([Exodus 11:4](#)) Though Moshe detailed the ramifications of the plague he was greeted with an apathetic response.

Finally the Torah tells us, that “Moshe left Pharaoh in burning anger” ([Exodus 11:8](#)) Why, only then did Moshe storm out in a rage? Was he not accustomed to the callous recklessness of the Egyptian leader? What irked him during the last encounter more than any of the previous ones?

The great physicist Albert Einstein escaped the Nazi inferno to find a haven in the United States. During World War II his letter to President Roosevelt initiated the effort that spurred the creation of the atomic bomb. His theory of relativity was a prime factor in its development, and Einstein knew the destructive power that his ideas could potentially release. When Einstein heard in an August 6, 1945, radio broadcast that an atomic device was dropped on the city of Hiroshima, he reacted with stunned silence. After a moment of somber reflection he only found two words to say. “Oy vey!”

Rabbi Shimon Schwab explains that Moshe had patience with Pharaoh up to a point. Throughout the ordeal, the reckless king’s obstinate decisions caused a great amount of discomfort to his people. Even when his advisors pleaded, “How long will this man [Moshe] be an obstacle, let them [the Jews] serve their G-d,” Pharaoh refused. His recalcitrance brought plagues of pestilence, boils, locust, and darkness — in addition to blood, frogs, and lice. All of these afflictions were vastly uncomfortable — but not fatal. Even the fiery hail did not harm the G-d-fearing Egyptians that sought shelter.

The last, the Plague of the First Born, had the most devastating ramifications. It meant the deaths of thousands of Egyptians “from the firstborn son of Pharaoh to those of the maidservant who was behind the millstone.” It was devastation so powerful that the Torah says that “such has never been and will never be again.” ([Exodus 11:6](#)) Pharaoh was able to stop the imminent destruction with one simple word — “Go.” Yet he chose to remain steadfast in his denial, bringing the downfall of his people and the death of innocents. And that callous and reckless behavior infuriated Moshe, whose compassion for the simplest of beings earned him the right to be the leader of the Jewish nation. The stark contrast displayed by his nemesis appalled him to the point of rage. The Torah commands us, “do not to hate the Egyptian, for you were a sojourner in his land.” ([Deuteronomy 23:8](#)) The Torah’s attitude toward a nation that held us captive is even more compassionate than that of its own leaders.

Barbaric leaders egging on many simple people throughout the world, to act in a self-destructive manner are reminiscent of the Pharaoh who destroyed his own family to save his ego. It’s enough to make anybody — even the most humble man who ever lived — very angry.

Pay Attention to the Details

By Rabbi Berel Wein

This week's parsha is the introduction to the halachic process of observance of the commandments of the Torah. In every commandment there are numerous layers of meaning and importance. There is the social and moral value that the commandment represents and teaches. There are also the technical minutiae and complex details that comprise the fabric of every commandment.

The commandments regarding the observance of Pesach and of the structuring of the Jewish calendar are part of this week's parsha. The general values of these commandments are apparent to all. Pesach represents for us the value and concept of freedom from bondage and teaches us the beginning history of our people. The calendar has always been a necessity for social and commercial life and keeps us in tune with the changing seasons of the year.

These are the general reasons and lessons of these commandments. However, as we also all know, the devil always lies in the details. What is the mechanism that will enable the story of our departure from Egyptian slavery to freedom to remain fresh and vital thousands of years later? Values only have life if they are somehow translated into human action and normative behavior.

Theories are wonderful but they rarely survive the tests of time and ever-changing circumstances. Every scientific theory is therefore subjected to be proven by physical experiment and validation. Freedom is a great theory but unless somehow put into practical application in society it remains divorced from the realities of everyday existence. Just ask the North Koreans or the Syrians and Iranians about freedom! It is the technical requirements of the commandment – the matzo, chametz, hagadah, etc. – that alone are able to preserve the value and validate the theory and guarantee its meaningfulness for millennia on end.

The uniqueness of the Jewish calendar lies also in its technical details. The permanent calendar that we now follow, established in the fifth century CE, is a lunar calendar with adjustments to make it fit into a solar year span. The technical halachic details of how the last Sanhedrin squared this circle are too numerous and detailed for the scope of this parsha sheet.

However, suffice it to say, that if not for those details and calculations our calendar would long ago have disappeared just as the ancient calendars of Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome have disappeared. Many people look at calendars not as Godly commandments but as merely a practical way to mark our passage through time. Thus the details are really not important to them since we are only interested in the so-called result.

But in Judaism, the details are of equal if not even greater importance than the general value and end result that they represent. In our time, those Jews who for various reasons only concentrated on the values, who were good Jews at heart but observed no commandments or details, rarely were privileged to have Jewish descendants.

Of course, concentrating only on the details and ignoring the value system that it represents is also a distortion of the Godly word. Seeing both the general value of a commandment and observing its necessary technical details in practice is the guarantee for allowing the Torah to survive amongst the people of Israel for all times.

Start Again

by Rabbi Eli Scheller

This month shall be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be for you the first of the months of the year. ([Ex. 12:2](#))

Kiddush Hachodesh (the sanctification of the new moon) was the very first commandment given to the Jewish nation as a whole, which suggests that this is a most significant mitzvah. A thousand years later it was one of only three commandments that the Greeks prohibited. The other two were Shabbos and *Milah* (circumcision). The fact that they saw fit to prohibit *Kiddush Hachodesh* together with those two commandments certainly implies it is a most central mitzvah, but what exactly is its significance?

Rosh Chodesh, the start of the new month, symbolizes renewal. Just as the moon disappears at the end of each month but returns and grows to fullness, so too the Jewish nation has the ability to rise up from oblivion and restore itself to past greatness. This essential characteristic of the Jews was first demonstrated in Egypt when the Jewish people had fallen to the 49th level of impurity, one level above spiritual extinction. They renewed themselves to such a degree that only seven weeks later they were able to stand at Mount Sinai, receive the Torah, and experience prophecy! It was this concept of renewal that the Greeks attempted to eliminate by ending the observance of *Rosh Chodesh*.

Everyone makes mistakes. The problem is that when a person feels guilty about what he has done wrong and sees himself as a failure, he may give up and lose the strength to keep trying to grow. In order to avoid this, he must recognize that although he has made a mistake he can always get back up, dust himself off and *start again*.

“And in order that you tell into the ears of your son and your son’s son how I made a mockery of the Egyptians, and My signs that I placed in them, and you will know that I am Hashem” (10:2)

When Hashem told Moshe that the Jewish people will share the story of the exodus with their children, the posuk concludes “and you will know that I am Hashem.” Why will relating the story help the speaker recognize Hashem? Isn’t the point of teaching the story so that the listener will understand that Hashem runs the world? The truth is that when a person teaches Torah, he gains even more clarity on the subject than the listeners. That is why it is so important for a person to share what he learns with others. People make a mistake and think that teaching takes away from their time to learn more, but the truth is that we grow the most from our students.

“Moshe and Aharon came to Pharaoh and said to him: Thus says Hashem the G-d of the Hebrews: Until when will you refuse to humble yourself before me? Send out My people that they may serve Me” (10:3)

Moshe’s request to Pharaoh was to allow the Bnei Yisrael to serve Hashem, which is our primary task in life. To be a servant is to be on call for our Master 24/7, to always remember that we have a boss and that we are always working for Him. As a mark of our servitude, we have a variety of symbols that are constant reminders of this relationship. Some of them are on our bodies, like the circumcision, which acts as an identification tag that we are in the employ of Hashem. Some of them are the things that we wear, like tefillin and tzitzis. Some of them are manifested through words that we say, like the institution of reciting blessings, which the Rambam says is a way to make sure that we remember Hashem throughout the day. When we do these mitzvos, we should think about their meanings and remember that we are working for Hashem at all times.

“Not so! Now, the men shall go and serve Hashem, for that is what you request. And he drove them out from before Pharaoh” (10:11)

Despite Moshe’s warnings, Pharaoh was very stubborn and refused to give into Moshe’s demand to let the people go. By this point, he knew that if Moshe was threatening a terrible plague, it was sure to happen. Pharaoh offered to let the men go and serve Hashem, but when Moshe insisted that everyone had to be allowed to participate Pharaoh stood on principle and would not give in. He insisted on getting his way, despite knowing that it would come at a great cost to himself and his entire country. We all have to realize the dangers of being like Pharaoh. If a person is never willing to compromise and accept a partial victory, he can lose tremendously. We are not always to get everything that we want and if we try to insist on it, we will end up worse off for it.

“They covered the surface of all the land and the land was darkened. They ate all the herbs of the land and all the fruit of the trees that the hail had left; and there was no green on the tree or on the herbs of the field in all of the land of Egypt” (10:15)

Why does the Torah emphasize the fact that the locust swarms darkened the land? The plague of locusts also contained an element of darkness as a warning to Pharaoh that things would get even darker if he did not take a lesson from this plague. Indeed, Pharaoh remained unmoved by the locusts and the partial darkness, so he had to suffer an extreme form of complete darkness in the next plague. When Hashem gives us a wake-up call, He first sends messages to us through small negative experiences as a way to get our attention. If that fails, then He will send a stronger message. The key in life is to pay attention to the small messages and make the harsher messages unnecessary.

“It is a night of protection for Hashem to take them out of the land of Egypt, it is this night which is a protection by Hashem for all the Children of Israel for their generations” (12:42)

R’ Dovid Feinstein comments that שמר can also mean “to anticipate” (as in Bereishis 37:11). Thus, the night of Pesach is a “night of anticipation” for Hashem. Hashem was waiting for the right time to take them out Egypt because there was no fixed time for the redemption. It depended on when they would be ready. R’ Feinstein notes that this is true of the future redemption as well. Hashem is waiting for the day when we will deserve the coming of the Moshiach. Only we have the ability to make it happen because it depends on our actions. Hashem is waiting for that day with great anticipation.

by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

The Importance of Eagerly Anticipating the Geula

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The *pasuk* introducing *Makas Choshech* (the Plague of Darkness) says, “Moshe stretched forth his hand toward the heavens and there was a thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt for a three-day period.” (Shemos 10:22). Rashi explains the reason for *Makas Choshech*: There were wicked people amongst the Jewish nation who did not want to leave Mitzraim. These people died and were buried during these three days of darkness so that the Mitzrim would not witness their downfall, thus enabling them to claim that the Jews were suffering plagues as well.

Rashi’s wording implies that the wickedness of these people was that they did not want to leave Mitzraim. Those who were not *me'tzapeh l'geulah* (anxiously looking forward to redemption) did not deserve to be redeemed. The *Peirush HaRosh al haTorah* says the same idea: He asks why did all these people die during the days of darkness, but Dasan and Aviram, who were totally wicked individuals, did not die during that period? The Rosh answers that even though Dasan and Aviram were wicked, they did not lose hope in the promised redemption.

The Medrash Rabbah is even more explicit. The Medrash says that there were Jewish slaves who had Egyptian patrons who gave them wealth and honor. They had it good in Mitzraim and did not want to leave! *Hashem* said, if He kills these Jews outright, the Mitzrim will say that the Jews are also dying, therefore *Hashem* brought *Makas Choshech*, during which these Jews could die without the knowledge of the Mitzrim.

This is something for us in the United States of America to bear in mind. *Baruch Hashem*, Jews have been able to have wonderful lives here. Torah is flourishing and many people are well off. But we always need to retain this aspiration of “*tzeepeesa l'yeshua*” (anxiously anticipating redemption). When the time comes, we should be anxious and excited to go to *Eretz Yisrael*. A person who says “What is so bad with staying in America?” is echoing the sentiments of the Jews who were wiped out during *Makas Choshech*.

This unfortunate phenomenon repeated itself all the way back at the time of Ezra. When Ezra told the Babylonian Jews after seventy years in exile “Okay, *Yidden*, it’s time to go back to *Eretz Yisrael*” they said “Babylonia is great!” Similarly, the Jews at the time of the Crusades felt their homes in Christian Europe were more than adequate. Their towns were destroyed! We need to keep that in mind as well. *Baruch HaShem*, we have a great life here but it is still lacking. We need to anticipate the *geula*, speedily in our days!

An Additional observation: Perhaps this is a silver lining regarding the current situation of the significant increase in antisemitism in the United States and around the world in reaction to the war in *Eretz Yisrael*. Just maybe this is like a gift from *Hashem* to remind us not to be too comfortable in *galus* and to anxiously anticipate the *geula*.

Long-Term Consequences

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

The Torah Portion sees the culmination of the ten plagues which devastated Egypt. The Rabbis tell us that during the Plague of Darkness, the Jewish people also suffered terrible losses; Rashi cites the opinion that four fifths died and only one fifth remained. The Mechilta that Rashi quotes actually brings two other opinions as to what proportion of the Jews were killed; one holds that only one fiftieth survived, and another holds that only one five hundredth were left. Rav Shimon Schwab cites a number of problems with the literal understanding of this Midrash.

Firstly, according to the two later opinions, there were 30 million or 300 million Jews in Egypt before the plagues. It is very hard to fathom that there were this many Jews there. Secondly, according to all the opinions, millions of Jews were killed and consequently this single disaster was far greater than all the plagues that the Egyptians suffered, Rav Schwab also finds this very difficult to accept. Thirdly, he quotes Rashi that they died and were buried during the darkness so that the Egyptians would not see that so many Jews died. He argues that if we accept this Midrash literally that millions died, then surely the Egyptians would have noticed such a significant loss.

Because of these problems Rav Schwab says that the Midrash should not be understood literally - rather only a relatively small number died, but had they lived they would have given birth to millions of people over several generations. The three opinions are arguing about how many descendants would have come from those that died. He suggests that perhaps all they disagree about is how to make an accounting of the survivors - one holds that we measure up to a certain point in time such as the building of the Temple, and another measures to a later point and consequently there are more descendants over that longer period.

He compares this interpretation to the Gemara which discusses the aftermath of the murder of Abel. God tells Kain that, "the **bloods** of your brother are crying out to Me from the ground." The Gemara says that not only Abel's blood was crying out - so too were all his potential descendants who would now never attain life. Kain did not just murder one man, he destroyed millions of lives through his single heinous act. Rav Schwab cites the recent tragic example of this concept in the Holocaust. He says that the Nazis did not kill six million people, rather they murdered untold millions in the form of their descendants who will never live.

So too, the tragedy of the death of the Jews in Egypt was to be its long-term effect - only a small number may have died then, but over the generations, millions were lost. Rav Schwab's explanation provides a whole new perspective to this death of the Jews in Egypt. We know that the reason they died is because they were not on the level to leave Egypt and become part of God's nation that would receive the Torah. Rav Schwab argues that these people must have been completely evil people to have to meet such an end. Based on the fact that they were relatively small in number and were so evil, it seems surprising that the Midrash gives so much emphasis to the long-term consequence of their death. We see from here that the loss of any Jew is cause for unlimited pain, no matter what his beliefs and lifestyle. In addition, there is also the strong possibility that righteous people would descend from them.

The Torah tells us that Moses demonstrated his awareness of this concept; when he saw an Egyptian striking a Jew, the verse says that, "he looked this way and that way but saw no man." Rashi explains that Moses looked into the future to see if any convert would descend from this Egyptian. Moses knew that killing him would have long-term consequences and acted accordingly.

More recently, Rav Shlomo Heimann recognized this to a very high degree; he gave a Torah lecture to dozens of students which was characterized by his energetic style. One day there was heavy snow and only four students attended the lecture, yet Rav Heimann gave the lecture with the same energy as always. His students asked him why he was putting so much effort into teaching such a small number of people. He answered that he was not merely teaching four students, rather all their future descendants and students.

If the rabbis see such a tragedy in the deaths of a few evil people how must we feel when we look at the situation of the Jewish people today? We live in a world where there are very few people who purposely turn their back on Torah or who devote their lives to destroying Torah values. There are millions of Jews who, through no fault of their own, were brought up with no knowledge of Torah and very little sense of the importance of being Jewish. Every day, dozens of Jews intermarry, and their Jewish descendants are lost forever.⁽⁵⁾ We are guaranteed that Messiah will come regardless of our spiritual level, therefore the reason that we should reach out to non-religious Jews is not to prevent the destruction of the Jewish nation - there is no fear of that happening. But we want to give every Jew and his potential descendants the chance to remain part of that nation so that they too can be present at the redemption.

May we all be merit to recognize the true value of every Jew and his potential offspring.

Let My People Change

By Sheldon Stern

The first Mishna of the fifth Perek of Avos teaches that the world was created with ten utterances. It then noted that G-d could have done so with a single declaration but He wanted to reward the righteous, who maintain the world, and punish the evildoers who destroy it. Judaism doesn't view Hashem as vengeful, rather we understand that G-d doesn't discipline in one fell swoop because He wants to give sinners an opportunity to repent. It thus follows that Egypt, under the auspices of Paroah, was subjected to Ten Plagues so that they could see the error of their ways and make amends. As events played out it wasn't until the tenth and final affliction that Paroah recanted. This leads us to ask two questions; 1. "Why didn't the potentate get the message until the end?" 2. "What was it about the killing of the firstborn that tipped the scales?"

We can answer the first query by looking at the royal's reaction to the first plague, in which all, except for Israel's, water in Egypt turned to blood. He turned to his necromancers and asked them to replicate this phenomenon. When they succeeded, he was emboldened. He thought to himself, "Okay, Moshe and Aaron picked up some tricks of legerdemain, but I'm not impressed." He probably found some Jew with an ample water supply and paid him off handsomely. As Mel Brooks famously said, "It's good to be king." The same scenario repeated itself when Egypt was tormented by frogs. Again, the royal sorcerers could use Kishuf to create their own swarms and so the emperor brushed off G-d's ambassadors as if they tried selling coals in Newcastle. But things changed with the third scourge, lice, because black magic doesn't work on objects less than the size of a barley grain. Did this move Paroah? No. He simply readjusted his thinking, "These plagues last for a week. I'm inside my royal castle. All my needs are attended to. This too shall pass." But then we come, in our Parsha, to the killing of the first born, and Paroah's world was rocked. But why?

Some years ago I befriended a fellow in Brighton Beach who had become a Baal Tshuvah. I asked him for the story and he simply told me, "I hit rock bottom." For Paroah releasing the Jews was unthinkable for two reasons. In Genesis 30:26 Yaakov asked permission from his father-in-law to return, with his family, to his homeland. In the next verse Lavan responded, "I've divined that it's because of you that I became successful." In other words, "You ain't going nowhere." Amid the hue and cry of the Spanish Inquisition, the royal couple, Ferdinand and Isabella, tapped into their best Harry Nilsson, "Can't Live if Living is Without You." They pleaded with Abarbanel, who was their Yosef Hatzaddik, not to leave the country. They promised him immunity from the church, but his loyalty was to his people and he refused their offer. Near the beginning of Parshas Shemos we're told that there was a new king who didn't know Yosef. Obviously, such a statement can't be understood literally. Paroah, at the time, was feeling himself and so he thought he could eliminate the Bnei Yisrael, but now as his world was collapsing he was looking for his security blanket, the Jews. The tyrant, in his twisted mind, believed that as long as he had control of Israel, he controlled the world. But there was a second reason that Paroah was averse to freeing his Hebrew slaves. The Midrash tells us that when Yaakov Avinu met the original incarnation of Paroah he gave him a blessing so that the Nile would rise for him. This planted the seed in his pompous mind that he was a deity. And he played the role to the hilt. But allowing the Jews to leave was to uncover his false facade of immortality, and so it was unthinkable. As George Costanza told his buddy Jerry Seinfeld, "If you believe it, it's not a lie." Paroah utilized any number of excuses to push off successive plague until Hashem reached the climax. This time it hit home on two counts. First, his own son, indoctrinated to follow him, was a casualty. But if that was not the most unkindest cut, it was Paroah's realization that he too, was a firstborn, and this brought his fragility to light leaving him no choice but to let Hashem's people go.

My mother was fond of this Yiddish expression, "Az mir zugt dem tuchter meint mir der shneur." Loosely translated, "if a woman chastises her daughter, the critique is meant for her daughter-in-law to hear." The Ten Plagues is a classic example of how Hashem runs the world, but the lesson is primarily intended for us, His Chosen People. In Parshas Eikev we're told that if one is careful with the Mitzvahs that people step on with their heels (Eikev) he'll be granted great rewards. Rashi explained that the Torah is referring to those "unimportant" Mitzvahs that people step on with their heels. The problem is that there is no such thing as an unimportant Mitzvah, so what does Rashi mean? Like Paroah, who couldn't (wouldn't) give in, there are Mitzvahs that go against some people's grain. As I write this, there's an active thread on VIN dealing with white collar crime in the Chareidi community. It's enlightening to see the comments, "They didn't hurt anyone. They only stole from the banks. It's permissible to steal from gentiles." My favorite was, "It's a victimless crime?" I responded, "So is carrying keys on Shabbos, but you'd never think of doing it." Those who defend these criminals are really exhibiting "Paroahism." They're convinced that theft is a necessary component to keep the frum world humming and so they won't consider any alternative. In 1976, Nick Lowe had a hit with "So it Goes." "And so it goes, and so it goes and so it goes and so it goes, but where it's going no one knows." And Dylan wrote, "The Times They are a Changin'." Finally, we have John who sang, "Strange days indeed, strange days indeed." Hashem is trying to get His message through but we're like Paroah, we don't want to listen because we're loath to change ourselves. So, we see what's happening in Iran and we think, "Hey, I'll bet that next year they'll have a Pesach program there." There are any number of savants presenting doomsday scenarios. That's not my style, because it serves no purpose other than to upset people. As George wrote in Beware of Darkness, "That is not what we are here for." Mike and the Mechanics had a hit called Silent Running, "Can you hear me, can you hear me calling, can you hear me calling can you hear me calling you?" Rabbi Miller said that the time to do Tshuvah is when you're eating a piece of watermelon." i.e. when things are good. We can't afford to wait until we hit rock bottom before listening to Hashem. All we need to do is be honest with ourselves and at least acknowledge that there are areas in our lives that need tweaking.