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Parshat HaShavua sheet**

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Parshat Shemos

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**BALANCE OF POWER**

*By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky*

“If nominated I shall not accept, if elected I shall not serve.” The words of Civil War general George Tecumseh Sherman ring clear in American history as a tribute to a man’s obstinate unwillingness to commit to further service to a shattered country. It seems that Moshe responds in almost the same manner, not to a nominating committee but to G-d Almighty. When Moshe is approached by Hashem to speak to Pharaoh, he defers. First he ponders, “Who am I to go to Pharaoh?” ([Exodus 3:11](#)) After Hashem exhorts him, Moshe tries a different tactic. “I am not a man of words... for I am a man heavy of mouth and speech.” ([Exodus 4:10](#)) Again G-d refutes his extenuation and chides Moshe that, after all, “who makes a mouth for man if not the Almighty?” And once again He urges Moshe to go to Pharaoh, assuring him that “I will be with your mouth and teach you what to say.” ([Exodus 4:12](#))

Finally, when Hashem assures Moshe that it is His hand that will guide him, His words that will be spoken and His spirit that will inspire him, Moshe still does not accept. He has one final seemingly lame pretext: “Send the one who You are accustomed to send.” ([Exodus 4:13](#))

The scenario is almost incomprehensible. After every one of Moshe’s protestations are well refuted by the Almighty, how did Moshe have the audacity to petition G-d to send someone else?

*My 2nd grade rebbe, Rabbi Chaim Follman, asked his Rosh Yeshiva, Rabbi Yaakov Kamenetzky, to officiate at the wedding of his daughter. Reb Yaakov checked his appointment calendar and shook his head slowly. “Unfortunately I have a prior commitment and can not fulfill your request.” He wished Reb Chaim and his daughter a heartfelt mazel tov, showered them with blessings, and added that if his schedule would open he would gladly join them at the wedding. On the day of the wedding, Rav Yaakov was informed that his original appointment was canceled. Immediately, he made plans to attend the wedding. Assuming he would come after the ceremony, he arrived at the hall long after the time that the invitation had announced that the ceremony would commence. Upon entering the wedding hall, Rav Yaakov realized that for one reason or another the chupah (marriage ceremony) had not yet begun. Quickly, Rav Yaakov went downstairs and waited, almost in hiding, near the coat room for nearly 40 minutes until after the ceremony was completed. A few students who noticed the Rosh Yeshiva huddled in a corner reciting Tehillim (Psalms) could not imagine why he was not upstairs and participating in the chupah. They, however, did not approach him until after the ceremony. Reb Yaakov explained his actions. “Surely Reb Chaim had made arrangements for a different m’sader kidushin (officiating rabbi). Had he known that I was in the wedding hall he would be in a terrible bind—after all, I was his first choice and I am much older than his second choice. Reb Chaim would be put in the terribly uncomfortable position of asking someone to defer his honor for me. Then Reb Chaim would have to placate that rabbi with a different honor, thus displacing someone else. I felt the best thing to do was stay in a corner until the entire ceremony had ended — sparing everybody from the embarrassment of even the slightest demotion.”*

Moshe’s older brother Ahron had been the prophet of the Jewish nation, guiding them, encouraging them, and supporting them decades before Moshe was asked by Hashem to go to Pharaoh. When Moshe was finally convinced by the Almighty that he was worthy of the designated mission and that his speech impediment was not an inhibiting factor, there was one more issue that Moshe had to deal with. And that factor was not in Hashem’s control. It was a very mortal factor — his brother Ahron’s feelings. Under no circumstance, even if every other qualification were met, would Moshe accept a position that might, in some way, slight his brother Ahron

Only after Moshe was assured of Ahron’s overwhelming moral support and willingness to forego his commission did Moshe accept the great task. Sanctity of mission and divinity of assignment end somewhere very sacred: at the tip of someone else’s heart.

## A Series of Ups and Downs

By Rabbi Berel Wein

The second book of the Torah, Shemot begins with the Jewish people at a high level of accomplishment and integration within Egyptian society. But from this lofty perch of security and success in Egyptian society they are soon toppled. The situation changes dramatically for them and they go from being accepted and even respected to the position of abject and cruel slavery. And this slavery situation is not temporary, for it will last for centuries. Eventually the Jewish people, though not certainly all of the Jews, or even a majority of them, are freed from Egyptian bondage by Divine intervention and are forged into a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

This wild roller coaster ride from dizzying heights to terrible lows and then the climb up again, is a startling example of God’s plan, so to speak, for Israel throughout all of its ages and climes. The Jewish world is seldom on an even keel. It has always been a series of ups and downs for us, many times even in one lifetime and generation. The past century is undoubtedly an excellent example of this pattern in Jewish history. Fortunate is the person who lives in the up times. But even that person has no guarantee that those good times are permanent and long lasting. The only thing certain in Jewish life is uncertainty. And even though we would wish for greater stability in these matters, we have to accept this Divine mandate of change and uncertainty.

Moshe’s appearance in the parsha is another example of this roller coaster, up and down situation of Jewish life. Moshe begins life as an infant thrown into the crocodile infested waters of the Nile River. He then is miraculously delivered from that fate of certain death and is raised as a prince in the house of the Pharaoh no less. He forfeits his high position out of loyalty and compassion to his Jewish brothers. A hunted man, he escapes Egypt and comes to Midian, there to marry and become a shepherd tending the flocks of his father-in-law.

Apparently there is no natural way that he can see to reclaim his role as a prince and leader. But at the incident of the burning bush the Lord plucks him away from his sheep flocks and sends him on his giant mission to redeem and educate the Jewish people, and through them of all of humankind.

Moshe rises to the highest level of human leadership and of spiritual attainment. He becomes the measuring rod – the symbol represented by his staff – of all future Jewish leadership and spirituality. But Moshe, like Israel itself, first had to be plunged into the depths of persecution and poverty before being raised to greatness. Why the Lord does things this way is naturally an unanswerable question. Suffice it for us to realize that this is our historical pattern, both in our national and personal lives. Let us hope that we will yet witness the ultimate high and full redemption of Israel and the vindication of Moshe’s great vision.

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## Dissension and Lashon Harah Undermine the Zechus of the Klal

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

The Medrash says in the beginning of Sefer Shemos that Moshe saw the tremendous suffering that *Klal Yisrael* was experiencing. Moshe asked: What is the *aveira* (sin) of the Jewish people – more than any of the seventy nations – that they should need to endure such back-breaking labor? In effect, he asked a question which was a form of the age-old mystery of *tzadik v’rah lo*. (Why do the righteous suffer?)

Later, the *pasuk* relates that Moshe went out amidst his brethren and saw the fight between the Egyptian and the Jew: “He looked here and there and saw there was no man, and he smote the Egyptian.” (Shemos 2:12) Subsequently, Moshe went out on the second day and saw two Jews fighting. He asked the attacker: “Why are you hitting your fellow man?” to which the accused asked, “Who made you officer and judge over us? Are you going to kill us like you killed the Egyptian?” The *pasuk* then says: “Moshe was very fearful and he said, “So now the matter is known.” (Shemos 2:13-14)

The simple interpretation is that Moshe’s statement “So now the matter is known” is that Moshe was alarmed that his killing of the Egyptian, which he thought was done in total secrecy, had become public knowledge, and the matter would eventually get back to Pharaoh, who would take punitive action against Moshe. However, Rashi brings a Medrash that Moshe’s statement “So now the matter is known” is an answer to his earlier question. Moshe said that he now understood why the Jews in Mitzrayim were experiencing such a terrible exile and suffering: I now realize that there are “*dilturin*” (talebearers and squealers) amongst the Jewish people.

The Sefas Emes raises a question: Yesterday, Moshe had a question for which he had no answer: How could it be that *Klal Yisraelis* worse than all the seventy nations of the world? Why do they need to suffer so much? The next day he sees that they speak *lashon harah* and he claims, “Now I understand their exile and suffering! The Sefas Emes asks: How does this simple observation answer Moshe’s incomprehensible theological problem?

The Sefas Emes answers that the point of the Medrash is to emphasize the tremendous severity of the *aveira* of *lashon harah*. Perhaps the Sefas Emes is saying that when *Klal Yisrael* functions as a *tzibbur* (united people), then, Moshe could not understand why they should be worse than any other nation. However, Moshe observed, "When I see that they speak *lashon harah*, then something happens – they no longer have unity and they cease to function as a *tzibbur*."

Initially, Moshe was looking at the phenomenon of the Jews' suffering from the perspective of the concept of "*Kol Yisrael arevim zeh l'zeh*." He could not understand the suffering because *Klal Yisrael* as a nation has so much *zechus* (merit) – why would they be suffering so much? But once Moshe realized that they spoke *lashon harah* – that destroys the unity of *Klal Yisrael*. Once that happens, the Heavenly decree is not directed at a *tzibbur* anymore. Hashem sees a bunch of individuals rather than a unified and holy people.

Dissension forfeits the status of a *klal* (community), which in turn forfeits the *zechusim* (merits) of the *klal*, such that the question "Why is *Klal Yisrael* suffering so much?" cannot be asked. They become just a bunch of individuals. Anything can happen to an individual. Once they are reduced to the status of individuals, the principle of '*tzadik v'rah lo*' – as incomprehensible as it may seem – can be invoked to 'explain' suffering that we cannot quite understand. However, the principle of '*tzadik v'rah lo*' does not apply to a *tzibbur*. The Torah promises "And it will be if you will hearken to the *mitzvos* that I command you... you will have rain, everything will be good, you will gather in your crops, etc., etc." As a nation, if you do the *mitzvos*, I am going to take care of you! Righteous individuals may suffer but not the nation as a whole, when it is righteous!

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## Was Moses Ever Wrong?

By Rabbi Yanki Tauber

More than three billion people — half the human race — base their ethos and belief system on his teachings. The people he founded have endured, under impossible conditions, for 33 centuries, confounding all historians. He's universally regarded as the ultimate lawgiver, the model leader, the quintessence of wisdom.

Yet in the very first chapters of the Torah's account of Moses' life (recorded, incidentally, by Moses himself), we read of a major blunder he made. A case in which this wise and devoted leader completely misjudged his people.

When G-d appeared to Moses in the burning bush instructing him to return to Egypt and free the Children of Israel from the yoke of slavery, Moses' reaction was, "They're not going to believe me."

A reasonable assumption, one might say. At that point, the Children of Israel had been in exile for 210 years, 86 of them as slaves. Hebrew babies were being cemented in walls. Along comes a man who has been absent for decades. "I'm your redeemer," he says, "I've come to take you out of Egypt. G-d sent me."

Isn't it reasonable for Moses to ask for some sort of proof he might present? A letter of recommendation in the form of a miracle or two he could perform, to back up his story?

G-d is furious with Moses. He gives him the miracles he asks for (three of them), but makes it clear that they are necessary only because he, Moses, thinks them necessary.

The first thing you must know about your people, G-d rebukes Moses, is that they are believers.

**“The Children of Israel were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong - very, very much so; and the land became filled with them” (1:7)**

The Netziv writes that "the land became filled with them" because they began to move out of Goshen. They did not listen to Yaakov's instructions to settle only in Goshen and remain separate from the Egyptians. Instead, as their numbers grew, they took up residences in the non-Jewish neighborhoods as well. This was part of a general effort to blend in with the Egyptians around them. Likewise, the midrash says that after Yosef's death, the Jews stopped circumcising their children in an effort to become like the Egyptians. This resulted in the events of the following posuk, the accession of a new king who despised the Jews and issued evil decrees against them. R' Nissan Alpert adds that this was a punishment that corresponded to what they had done wrong. The Jews acted as if they did not know Yosef. They failed to follow Yosef's example to remain separate while living in a foreign society. As a result, there came a new king who did not know Yosef. He may have known Yosef, but like the Jewish people, he chose to overlook who Yosef was and the lessons that should have been learned from his life. In modern times, it is still especially important for us to make sure that we know Yosef. We should feel like strangers when we are in exile and not become too comfortable. The Netziv adds that it is when we try to blend in and begin to forget that we are in exile that our enemies gain power and attempt to annihilate us.

**“The king of Egypt summoned the midwives and said to them: Why have you done this thing, that you have caused the boys to live” (1:18)**

What was the greatness of the midwives? The Chofetz Chaim writes that when Pharaoh commanded them to kill the baby boys, they could have resigned in protest. In this way, they would have not done anything wrong. Nobody could have any complaints about them. However, they realized that if they would quit, Pharaoh would hire other midwives in their places who would do the job for him. They understood that they had to put themselves at risk by taking the job and then not doing it. Not being the one to carry out the evil plan was not enough, they needed to subvert the plan themselves. In fact, Rashi cites the Gemara in Sotah 11b on the expression that they "caused the boys to live" that they fed the babies and gave them to drink. Pharaoh was angry at them because not only did they refrain from killing the babies, but they helped them and made sure that they survived. They recognized what needed to be done and they acted accordingly.

A man once sought R' Yisrael Salanter's advice about whether to accept a certain rabbinical position. When he was advised to take the job, he protested that he was afraid that he would make mistakes in halacha and give people wrong answers to their questions. R' Yisrael Salanter told him that if he did not take the position, then someone less worthy would take it and nothing would be accomplished. It would be better for a worthy person who has these concerns to take the job and with the help of Hashem he would succeed. Often people will turn down responsibility because they feel unworthy. However, although such an attitude appears righteous on the surface, it really is incorrect. What is more important is the honor of Hashem. If a person recognizes that, despite his own perceived shortcomings, he is the best person for the job, he should take it with the intention of creating the maximum amount of glory for Hashem as possible. Modesty is important, but up to a point. Just as the midwives could have walked away but instead chose to take the responsibility to undermine Pharaoh, we should not be afraid to take charge and do things that will increase the service of Hashem and the glory of Hashem around us.

**“Hashem heard their moaning, and Hashem remembered his covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak and with Yaakov” (2:24)**

The Seforno underscores the direct connection in this posuk between the prayer of the Jewish people and Hashem's decision that the time for the redemption had arrived. It was the power of prayer that helped the Jews earn their redemption from Egypt. The posuk writes that when the Jews davened, Hashem heard them and then remembered his covenant with their forefathers. It is a direct cause and effect. This correlation is repeated by Hashem in next week's parsha (6:4) as well. If we daven sincerely for our needs, Hashem will listen and will do what is best for us. No sincere tefilla goes unanswered because Hashem is there for us whenever we call out to Him.

*By Rabbi Mayer Friedman*

## Immediate Goodness

by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

In this week's parsha, Moses flees to Midian, where two sons are born to him and Tziporah. But the sons seem to be named in the wrong order. His first son is named Gersham - meaning that "I am a stranger in a strange land." His second is Eliezer - meaning that "God saved me from Pharaoh." Moses names his sons as a continual reminder of the goodness that exists in his life. Moses is a stranger in a new land and yet God has allowed him to prosper. He has been saved from Pharaoh who wished to kill him. Every time he calls to his sons, he will be reminded of these blessings. It's a great idea, but not chronologically correct. Because first, Moses was saved from Pharaoh, and then when he fled to Midian, he prospered in a strange land. So why did Moses reverse the order? I think the answer lies in our ability (or lack of it) to appreciate immediate goodness. I often find, for example, if I take my kids out for the day, I will look back at the end of the day and think of how pleasurable it was to watch them have such a good time. But take me back to the middle of the day when all was going crazy and it was a lot harder for me to enjoy myself. It's sad that so often, we can only enjoy pleasures once they have passed.

I think the reason for this is obvious. True and deep pleasure requires effort and struggle. When experiencing the effort, it's so much harder to stop and appreciate the goodness. But once the effort is over, we can look back and recognize just how good it was. There is only one problem, however. We only "remember" how good it was. We experience a *memory* of the pleasure, but not the real thing. The deepest pleasures require that we experience the pleasure while it is happening, even though it is also very difficult.

Surely, the time for me to enjoy my kids is not once they are in bed, but when I am actually with them. Moses has this idea mastered. For him, the immediate goodness is that he is thriving in a strange land. This is hard to appreciate, as it is also very challenging. So he names his first son as a reminder of the goodness he has in spite of the struggle he is going through. His salvation from Pharaoh is goodness he wishes to be reminded of also. But the pain of this has passed and so it is easier to feel the pleasure. For a great man like Moses, it is of secondary priority, and hence is the name given to his second son. We could take so much more out of life if we didn't allow the effort to distract us from the pleasure. It's not easy to do, but if we focus on the goodness, we can enjoy our children ... even when they are driving us crazy.

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## Turning Point

By Sheldon Stern

"Turn the Page" is arguably Bob Seger's greatest song. In the beginning of this week's Parsha, the page was turned from the Bnei Yisrael's idyllic existence in Goshen into the unremitting horror of barbaric slavery. Of course, Hashem didn't forget His Chosen People, but our redeemer wasn't dispatched until he faced his own "turning point." "Verse 3:4 says, "G-d saw that he(Moshe) "turned" to see and He called him from within the thorn bush." One might ask why this is so noteworthy. Let's imagine that the Sneh came down to earth on Times Square as the revelers were celebrating the incoming New Year. Even if the ball was about to drop all eyes would've been riveted on that majestic sight. So wouldn't it be obvious that it would draw our future savior's attention?

The fifth Perek of Avos presents six scenarios in which four distinct character traits emerge. I would suggest that all the cases are actually mirror images of each other. To prove this, let's choose one of the examples and compare it with our storyline. Mishna 5:15 states that there are four types with regard to studying from the Sages, the sponge, funnel, strainer and sieve. It would follow that there are four attitudes for those who behold the "Burning Bush." So we start with the funnel, which allows the wine(Torah) to go in one end and come out the other barely making any impression on the person. For the Sneh we have the cynic. Initially taken aback, he regains his composure, "That's the phoniest looking fire I've ever seen, you'd think that with AI that conjurer could've whipped up something that at least appears realistic." He then walks away dismissing what he saw out of hand. Next we have the sponge. He absorbs the wine(Torah) but doesn't assimilate what he imbibed. His parallel sees the flame and is duly impressed, but when he looks at his watch he recalls, as McCartney sang (She's Leaving Home), "An appointment he made, meeting a man from the motor trade." And so again, it's out of sight out of mind. Then we have the strainer. He retains the sediment and lets the wine flow through. How does that happen? When he hears a familiar subject, he's fully engrossed, but then spaces out when new material is introduced. His equivalent sees the fire and decides to check it out to make sure it's legit. So he throws a piece of paper into it which is immediately incinerated. Now, he's in a conundrum, because he can't explain this phenomenon, so he concludes that the bush must be composed of some space age material that's fire resistant and he walks away none the wiser. Finally, we have the sieve. He keeps the wine and allows the dregs to settle out. When this fellow hears something new, he's all ears, because his understanding of the Torah is expanded. And he's not ashamed to ask questions, as he's simply looking for the truth.

Similarly, when Moshe saw the Sneh, he recognized that this was not only beyond anything he had ever seen, but that he would have to recalibrate his entire weltanschauung. So it wasn't the fact that Moshe looked at the flame that won Hashem over, it was that he "turned" to see it, meaning he totally rebooted, or as Descartes would say, millennia later, he changed his mind into a Tabula Rasa. As for the others, we recall this line from Lynrd Skynrd's magnum opus, "Free Bird" "L-rd knows I can't(won't) change." They follow the principle of, "Where ignorance is bliss tis folly to be wise." So they go on with their lives having gained nothing from the experience. For them we cite the Lennon classic, "Strawberry Fields Forever," "Living is easy with eyes closed, misunderstanding all you see."

But this leaves us with another question, "Why was it important for Hashem to choose someone with such an inquiring mind?" In Genesis 4:1 we're told that Adam "knew" Eve and she conceived. Yes, the Biblical word "know" is a euphemism, but seemingly it could've said that he "found" her, or he "met" her, or a vast array of similar verbs; what's the significance of "knowing?" In 1958 the Teddy Bears featuring lead singer Carol Connors( nee Annette Kleinbard) scored with, "To Know, Know, Know Him is to Love, Love, Love Him."(I was raised in a home with older sisters so I absorbed their tastes in music by osmosis.) But George Harrison said it all in his post-Beatles hit, "My Sweet L-rd," "Really want to know You, really want to go with You." So the Torah's word selection wasn't accidental. The Gemara relates that Avraham Avinu intuited the entire Torah by observing nature, particularly the Animal Kingdom. This was the ultimate expression of his love for Hashem, the desire to come as close to possible by "knowing" as much as is humanly possible to know about the Creator.

If the Torah highlights Avraham's Middah of Chesed, for Moshe it's Anivus, but this all consuming desire to learn is part and parcel of Anivus. The Mishna in Avos 4:1 says, "Who is wise? He who learns from everyone." And this is an expression of humility, and that's easily provable. Mishlei 9:10 states, "The beginning of wisdom is fear of the L-rd." Now to fear Hashem means to be ever mindful of Him, as this is a constant reminder of one's puniness. Hashem foresaw that Moshe would serve as the Bnei Yisroel's consiglieri in the Midbar. To be up to that task, he had to be able to present winning "arguments" against Hashem and this wasn't possible unless he not only mastered the Torah, but could, in a real sense, transcend it. The Midrash tells us that when Hashem presented Rabbi Akiva to Moshe, the latter displayed his characteristic modesty, and suggested that the Tanna should have been chosen as the vehicle to bring the Torah to this world. As the noted sportscaster Warner Wolf used to say, "Let's go to the videotape." Hashem continued showing Moshe the replay until Rabbi Akiva said, "This is Halacha L'Moshe M'Sinai." This is to say that Moshe was able to extrapolate laws for which there were no sources in Scriptures. Hashem rewarded Moshe's selflessness, by placing him "above" the Torah.

Now let's return to those who didn't, as Bowie sang, "make the grade," because, truth be told, we have much more in common with them than with Moshe Rabbeinu. If we return to Skynrd's "Free Bird" the lead singer Ronnie Van Zant offered, "L-rd help me, I can't change." That line is actually an oxymoron, because if a person can't or won't change G-d will have nothing to do with him. The Partridge Family scored with "I'll Meet You Halfway." Hashem doesn't ask nearly that much of us. The Midrash to Shir Hashirim 5:2 quotes Hashem, "Open for Me an opening the size of the eye of a needle and I'll enlarge that opening so that wagons can pass through it." So it all starts with us. The history books tell us that Gavrilo Princip's assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the cause for WWI. That's obviously an oversimplification, but it's a common convention to attach significance to specific events. In the aftermath of Charlie Kirk's murder, our supposed friends in the Republican Party have shown a different side. Charlie was a buffer. He encouraged free speech even from those who espoused views that were diametrically opposed to his own. And in such a healthy environment such voices as Ben Shapiro were free to express their opinions. But that has changed, and now we have the Conservative Right openly flexing their anti-Semitic muscles. Yes, his death was a turning point, and that shouldn't be lost on us since his organization was called "Turning Point USA." But we have to remember that our hope is not to be found with the Republicans, nor with our Askanim nor even our Rabbanim, as great as they may be. When the Jews fought Amalek for the first time the tide turned when Moshe was able to lift his hands in prayer. This was because the people turned to Hashem. It has always been that way and it will always be that way, but to do so we must heed the words of Santana, "Evil Ways," "L-rd knows you've got to change."