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Parshat HaShavua sheet

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Parshat Bo

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TOTAL CONTROL

By Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

“Come to Pharaoh,” says the Almighty at the beginning of this week’s portion. “For I will harden his heart and the hearts of his servants in order to put my wonders in his midst.”

The concept of a hardened heart, influenced by Divine intervention, is grappled with by countless commentators and myriad meforshim. After all, how do we reconcile a Divinely hardened heart with free-will?

Some explain that Divinity only influenced Pharaoh’s physical resilience, as Hashem did not want to score a definitive knockout in the early rounds. Others discuss how Divine intervention can actually hinder the opportunity of penitence. All in all, the natural order was changed, and the imposition on Pharaoh’s free-will rarely occurs to the rest of humanity. What troubles me, however, is the juxtaposition of Hashem’s request that Moshe once again beseech Pharaoh, followed by the words, “because I will harden his heart.”

Aren’t those two separate thoughts? Shouldn’t the command be “go to Pharaoh because I want him to free My people”? From the word flow it seems that Hashem’s hardening of Pharaoh’s heart was a reason for Moshe to go to Pharaoh. Was it?

A friend of mine visited an amusement park. Among the attractions was a haunted house. It was pitch black inside, save for dim lights that illuminated all types of lurking monsters strategically placed to scare the defiant constituency that dared to enter the domain. Reading the warnings for park patrons who were either under 12 years old, below a certain height, or suffering high blood pressure or heart disease, my friend hurried his family past the attraction. He only glanced at the almost infinite list of other caveats and exculpatory proclamations from the management. He surely did not want his kids to challenge him to the altar of the outrageous. Then he noticed the line that was forming. The people on line were tattooed motorcyclists, each more than six feet tall and broadly built. In spite of the ominous warnings that were posted, they stood anxiously in line waiting to prove their masculinity to themselves and the groups that hurried by the frightening attraction. But nestled among the miscreants of machismo, he noticed a young boy, no more than seven-years-old, standing on line. He was laughing and giggling as if he were about to ride a carousel. My friend could not contain himself. Surely, he could not let a young child like that show him up. “Sonny,” he called to the boy. “Can’t you read? This is a really scary ride. And besides, you’re not even ten!” The boy just laughed. “Why should I be scared?” “Why should you be scared?” my friend asked incredulously. “This is the scariest ride in the park! It is pitch black in there! You can’t see a thing — except for the monsters!” The boy’s smile never faded. In fact it broadened. Then he revealed the source of his courage. “You see the man over there?” He pointed to a middle-age fellow who sat in front of a switch-filled control box. “Well that’s my dad! If I just give one scream,” exclaimed the child, “all he does is flip one switch and all the lights go on, and the monsters turn into plastic dummies!”

Rav Yecheil Meir Lifschutz of Gustinin explains that Hashem began the final stages of the redemption commanding Moshe, “Go to Pharaoh.” Hashem’s next words were said as the reason to disregard any of Pharaoh’s yelling, shouting, and cavorting. They are totally meaningless, “Because I will harden his heart. I am the one in control. I am the one who hardens hearts and causes tyrants to drive you from their palaces.” With one flip of a heavenly switch they will chase after you in the darkest night and beg you to do the will of the Creator.” So “Go to Pharaoh,” says the Almighty “because I am the one who hardens his heart!”

When faced with challenges, we can approach them with a sense of certainty if we know that there is a higher destiny that steers our fate. We can even walk into the den of a Pharaoh with the confidence of one who knows that it is the Master of Creation who is pulling the switch.

Exodus: Elevating Yourself and Others

by Rebbetzin Esther Jungreis

At the beginning of the *parashah*, we are told that one of God's goals for the Exodus from Egypt was to insure that we tell that story to our progeny: "... and so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt, and My signs that I placed among them - that you may know that I am Hashem."

After reading this passage, an obvious question comes to mind: If we are commanded to teach our children, then it is *they* who will know, but the text reads "that *you*," the teller of the story, may know. Furthermore, the order appears to be reversed: Should not one have knowledge before teaching? The Torah is revealing a profound truth regarding human nature.

The best way to acquire understanding is by accepting responsibility and instructing others, for that experience compels us to study and seek insights. Thus, it is not unusual for men or women who never gave too much thought to their Judaism to undergo a total transformation once they become parents. They realize that if they are to convey something of lasting value, and if they are to tell "the story" to their children, they must first and foremost possess that knowledge. This logic holds true, not only vis-à-vis raising children; every time we are challenged to explain ourselves as Jews, we are prompted to explore our roots.

The text also shows us how we might best impart this lesson: "Relate in the *ears* of your son" - the teaching must be personalized and intimate. The study of Torah cannot be simply a cerebral experience, but it must be an emotional and spiritual one as well. It must be transmitted from heart to heart with love and passion. It is this that enabled Joseph to retain his faith as a lone Jew in Egypt. Despite his suffering, he never faltered, for engraved upon his heart and mind was the image of his father's teaching.

From this passage our Sages also conclude that if three generations (fathers, sons, and sons' sons) in one family are committed to the study of Torah, we may be assured that the Torah and the mitzvos will never depart from that family. The litmus test of Jewish continuity is whether Judaism continues into the third generation. In our contemporary society, in which demographics demonstrate that so many of our people are assimilating and intermarrying, this question weighs heavily upon us. Every Jew must ask himself, *Am I doing enough to insure that my grandchildren will remain Jews?*

Tragically, ours is a generation that has become spiritually orphaned, and most of us do not have *zeides* who can tell the story. Therefore, we must seek out our rabbis and Torah teachers and ask them to "relate the story in [our] ears." We have survived the centuries because this commandment to tell the story to our children and our children's children is at the heart of our faith. No matter where destiny may have taken us, we continued to relate that tale and shall continue to do so until the end of time.

Let My People Go

by Rabbi Shaul Rosenblatt

Back in the 1980s, the tag-line for the campaign to free Soviet Jewry came from this week's Torah portion: "Let My people go," Moses said to Pharaoh. However, that's only the first half of the phrase used by Moses. He continued. *"Let My people go ... so that they should serve Me [God]."* In other words, let them go *for a purpose*.

In Jewish thinking, freedom alone is not a value. If a man is free and he uses this freedom to hurt others, to abuse his body with drugs, or to waste his life, is such a freedom of value? Better that he be a slave.

Freedom is only of value if there is purpose attached to it. Without purpose, people will be no happier free, than if they were slaves.

Modern Israel has faced many existential challenges throughout its history - wars, terror, UN condemnations. However, in my mind, the greatest threat to Israel today is not Ahmadinejad or Hamas. Israel's greatest threat today lies in its lack of purpose. At least a million Israelis have left the country. Young Israelis are disillusioned. And the universally dirty business of politics is seemingly nowhere dirtier than in the Holy Land. As of today, America is a safer place for Jews and a country where Jews know unprecedented freedom. So what purpose does Israel serve?

Let My people go... so that they may serve Me. Freedom must include a meaningful purpose.

And yet of all nations, for the Jewish people to lack purpose is the most ironic. Our whole history is one of dreaming of a better world and striving toward that goal. From our very inception, the concept of being a 'light to the nations' has inspired and driven us. And we have done so. The values of our Bible have permeated the entire world.

We've had a purpose, and that purpose remains agonizingly within reach. If only we would grasp onto it. A person drowning is tragic. But a person drowning because he is lying down in a few inches of water and all he need do is stand up, is unbearably tragic.

That's what the Jewish people are doing today. We are drowning because young Jews find no meaning in Judaism. No meaning in Judaism?! We are drowning in an inch of water. It's about time that we stood up. And if you're already standing, help someone else get up.

The Almighty Wanted to Do it HIMSELF

By Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Bo contains the last three of the Ten Plagues. Finally, Pharaoh says “enough!” and he lets the Jews go. The commentaries ask a very simple question. (Perhaps this question has come up at your Seder table on the first night of Pesach): Why did it take Ten Plagues for Pharaoh to say “enough!”? Hashem certainly had the power to give one strong plague at the outset that would have immediately brought Pharaoh to his knees and forced him to order the Jewish people immediately out of the country. And yet, there were the Ten Plagues. Why were they all necessary?

More to the point, we learn about the Exodus from Egypt in these *parshiyos* at the beginning of Sefer Shemos, but there was also another exodus in the history of the Jewish people called the Babylonian exodus. *Klal Yisrael* were exiled from their Land and dwelled in Bavel for seventy years. After seventy years, that exile also ended. How did that happen?

The Navi says that this happened because King Koresh [Cyrus] of Persia was inspired by the Almighty to suddenly grant the Jewish people permission to go back to *Eretz Yisrael* and rebuild the *Beis HaMikdash*. It says in Divrei HaYamim, “Hashem aroused the spirit of King Koresh of Persia, and he issued a proclamation throughout his kingdom – and in writing as well – saying: ‘Thus said Koresh king of Persia: Hashem, G-d of Heaven, has given to me all the kingdoms of the earth, and He has commanded me to build Him a Temple in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Whomever there is among you of His entire people – may Hashem his G-d be with him, and let him go up!’” [Divrei HaYamim II 36:22-23]. Koresh felt that the Almighty had given him a mission to release the Jews, and have them rebuild the Beis HaMikdash (for which he in fact paid a large percentage of the expenses). This could have happened in Egypt as well. Without any plagues, Pharaoh could have woken up one morning and said, “You know what? This is not right. I want to emancipate the slaves.” He could have emancipated the Jewish slaves, and instead of having a Lincoln Memorial, as there exists in Washington, D.C., we could have had a Pharaoh Memorial in Jerusalem. Why didn’t the *Ribono shel Olam* do it that way?

Rav Shlomo Kluger, in his *sefer* on *Chumash*, explains that the Almighty wanted it to occur the way it did. He wanted that Pharaoh should be obstinate rather than to be inspired to emancipate the Jews. Hashem wanted Pharaoh to be defeated in a prolonged battle of wills. He wanted Pharaoh to be “broken.” The Almighty did not entertain the possibility of releasing the Jews from bondage with anything less than ten plagues. The Ribono shel Olam wanted *Klal Yisrael* to realize that “I am Hashem your G-d who took you out from the Land of Egypt to be for you a G-d. I am Hashem your G-d.” [Bamidbar 15:41]. Hashem wanted it to be clear that it was not anybody else’s doing. Such an “Exodus” cemented the relationship between Hashem and His People. Had Pharaoh given up after one plague, or had he been inspired, like Koresh, to let the people go, then we would not have this same relationship with the *Ribono shel Olam*, because we could say, “Listen, Pharaoh turned a new leaf.”

We say at our Seder, “And if the Holy One Blessed be He would not have taken us out of Egypt, we and our children and our children’s children would be enslaved (*me’shubadim*) to Pharaoh in Egypt.” Everyone asks the obvious question: “What does it mean we would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt? The Pharaohs are all dead. They no longer rule in Egypt! Empires come and go. It would be a historic anomaly of great proportions to think that after three thousand years, we would still be slaves to Pharaoh. The answer is that the word “*me’shubadim*” does not mean we would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. It means we would be indebted to Pharaoh.

Come and see all the celebrations that were held at the Lincoln Memorial during the inauguration of America’s first Black president. The Black people in this country still feel a strong kinship and *hakaras haTov* to Abraham Lincoln. Why is that? He freed the slaves. He wrote the Emancipation Proclamation. He is recorded by history as the person who freed the slaves in this country. If our exodus from Egypt would have come about from the good will of Pharaoh, we would be *me’shubad* – indebted to the historical image of that Pharaoh! Hashem did not want that to be the case. As we read in last week’s parsha, “...and you shall know that I am Hashem your G-d, who took you out from under the burdens of Egypt.” [Shemos 7:7]. You are *me’shubad* [indebted] to me, and to nobody else. This event formed the relationship between *Klal Yisrael* and the *Ribono shel Olam*.

The end of *Galus Bavel* was a pale comparison to the end of *Galus Mitzrayim*. Yes, they went out of Bavel. But how many Jews left *Bavel* and came back to *Eretz Yisrael*? Only 43,000. Even when they arrived back in *Eretz Yisrael*, they were still not a sovereign state. They were still under the dominion of others. The *Beis HaMikdash* that was rebuilt was a pale comparison to the First *Beis HaMikdash*. In fact, the book of Ezra says that the older people who remembered the first *Beis HaMikdash* cried at the inauguration of the Second *Beis HaMikdash*, because it was such a pale comparison [Ezra 3:12]. Hashem allowed such a “*Geulah*” [redemption] to be inspired by Koresh because it was not such a “big deal.” However, *Mitzrayim*’s Exodus was the paradigm of our relationship with Him. This was the marriage of the Jewish People with the *Ribono shel Olam*. This had to be a “big deal” such that it was implemented with the philosophy of “I and not a *Malach*; I and not a *Saraf*” – nobody else.

The commentaries say that *Geulas Mitzrayim* is the paradigm for the future *Geulah*. If we want to know what it is going to look like, what it is going to feel like, what is going to happen “in the End of Days,” – the exodus from Egypt is our paradigm. Rav Pam writes, “Why is it that the Nations of the World hate us so much? Why is *Sinas Yisrael* so apparent?” Rav Pam explains that we are now replicating the paradigm of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. When the future redemption will arrive, it will not be because the nations of the world will be good to us. Just as back then, the nations of the world hated us and wanted to see us destroyed, we see the same exact thing today among almost all of the present nations of the world.

Hashem wants us to clearly understand that our redemption will not come from the righteous amongst the nations. We should not deceive ourselves into believing that this is “from whence our help will come” [Tehillim 121:1]. The subliminal message we should be hearing from the Almighty is that “I am going to take you out of this *Galus*, and nobody else is going to help.” Rav Pam asked, “What is the purpose of the United Nations?” Other than being a forum to bash Israel, what has it accomplished?” He cites the Talmud in Avodah Zarah [2b]: In the future time when the *Moshiach* is going to come, the nations will come and say, “We were so good to the Jews. Many bridges did we build; many roads did we pave; we built many cities. We did all this for Israel. We did this for the Jews so that they could occupy themselves with Torah. Now we are here to claim our reward.”

The Almighty will “give it to them.” He will call them out on all their lies and falsehoods. Rav Pam says that this is the purpose of the United Nations. Every debate is recorded. Every vote against Israel is recorded. Every vote against the Jews is recorded. In the future world, when the representatives of the nations will come and claim, “All we have done is for the welfare of Israel,” the Almighty will take out the United Nations roll call votes, and prove to them that they are liars and fakers when they make such claims. “Liars! You did not act on behalf of My People. You hated My People!” Now is payback time. This is what will happen in the future world – just like it happened in Egypt. Not through a *Malach* and not through a *Saraf* – but only through the Holy One Blessed be He, in all His Glory.

The Importance of Eagerly Anticipating the Geula

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!

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 Yisroel. 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*.

“And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have amused Myself with Egypt and My signs that I placed among them - that you may know that I am Hashem” (10:2)

Why would one first teach his child and only then become aware of the greatness of Hashem? Is it not necessary to have knowledge of Hashem before teaching about Him to his children? The answer is that many parents come to grow through teaching their children. Teaching children increases their appreciation and knowledge of Hashem. This is similar to the statement of the Gemara that a teacher learns more from his students than from his teachers or his peers. When someone teaches another person who knows less, not only will he be imparting valuable knowledge to his student but he himself will grow as well. His Avodas Hashem will become more meaningful as he will have gained a greater appreciation for how he conducts his daily life.

“And this is how you shall eat it: your loins girded, your shoes on your feet, and your staff in your hand; and you shall eat it in haste it is a Pesach sacrifice to Hashem” (12:11)

The Jews ate the Korban Pesach with their belts and shoes on, walking sticks in hand, dressed and ready to go. Seferno writes that the purpose of this was “to demonstrate a level of trust without any doubt in Hashem by preparing themselves for a journey while still in prison.” This expression of their tremendous faith in Hashem served as a merit to earn their freedom. The taking of the sheep for the Korban Pesach and the application of its blood on the doorposts also gave expression to their faith and trust in Hashem. By publicly taking and then slaughtering the deity of Egypt without fear, they displayed their confidence in the existence of a Higher Authority and His protection. Today, we read about how so many Israeli soldiers are putting on tzitzis as they enter the battlefield in Gaza. What statement are they making by doing that? It represents their confidence in Hashem and their trust and belief in His protection. With Hashem’s help, this expression of faith will serve as a great merit to protect them as they face the dangers of combat.

“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 of 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.

“It shall be for you a sign on your hand and as bands between your eyes, for with strength of hand Hashem brought us out from Egypt” (13:16)

Why do we have so many mitzvos that commemorate our exodus from Egypt? As long as we know and believe that it happened, shouldn’t that be enough? The Ramban explains that throughout history, people have denied that Hashem created the world. Even many of those who did believe in a Creator believed that He was not involved in the running of the world but that nature always runs its course. They felt that Hashem was not powerful enough to change natural law. But the plagues in Egypt contradicted all of these falsehoods. By sending a prophet to predict the impending plagues and then sending them with such force and only upon the Egyptians, all these theories evaporated. It was clear for all to see that Hashem exists, that He knows and cares about what happens in the world and that He created the world and is quite capable of changing the natural course of events. In short, the events of Yetzias Mitzrayim validated the entire Torah. However, this was a one-time event. Hashem does not create miracles and wonders to counteract the claims of every person who denies Him. Instead, Hashem displayed all his glory once, in Egypt, with the intent that it should stand for all time as a reminder of His existence and strength and as a proof against those who would deny these truths. In order that this proof of Hashem’s greatness and this basis of our belief should remain with us at all times, Hashem instructed us to reenact Yetzias Mitzrayim every year on Pesach. Not only that, but we are to write about these events and post them on our doors as mezuzos and bind them to our arms and heads as tefillin. We are commanded to mention Yetzias Mitzrayim verbally twice a day in Shema. All this is so that we never forget the basic truths expressed in the events that happened in Egypt and that we steadfastly believe in them. When one purchases a mezuzah or when one wears tefillin or when one mentions Yetzias Mitzrayim in Shema or does one of the many other mitzvos that are “a commemoration of Yetzias Mitzrayim,” he expresses his belief that Hashem exists, that He is involved in world events, that He created the world and is capable of intervening with the laws of nature at will and that the Torah is of Divine origin and everything that is contained within it is true. This is why, says the Ramban, it is so important to have daily mitzvos commemorating these important events. We should bear this idea in mind whenever such mitzvos cross our paths and remember what we are affirming by performing them.

Redemption Is Not Always Easy

By Rabbi Berel Wein

Salvation and redemption do not come easily. In this week's parsha the cost of Israel's redemption is graphically detailed in the Torah. Though the major cost and punishment is meted out to the Egyptian Pharaoh and his nation, the oppressors and enslavers of the Jewish people, Midrash teaches us that the Jews also suffered great loss in this process of redemption and of gaining their freedom.

According to certain midrashic opinion most of the Jews never were able to leave Egypt at all. Only a minority successfully followed Moshe out of the house of slavery. And ironically, even most of those who did leave Egypt would eventually be unable to live to see the promised land of Israel.

Why must the process of redemption and independence be such a long and painful one? After all, the Lord could certainly have made it much easier on all concerned. The obvious lesson is that freedom and redemption, both physical and spiritual, has little value if it is not hard won.

That is the symbol of the blood on the doorposts that signaled the immediate moment of redemption. "And I [the Lord] said unto you: With your blood [and sacrifice] shall you live!" The rabbis interpreted the repetition of this phrase twice as referring to the paschal sacrifice and the blood of circumcision.

Redemption is apparently meant to be hard won. It is not a gift that entails no cost. Becoming a Jew entails blood at the beginning of life. Becoming the truly free Jew that the Torah commands us to become entails lifelong sacrifice and the blood that this entails.

Our generation is also involved and absorbed in a struggle for redemption and salvation, both personal and national. This struggle has taken a great toll on our enemies, but in a psychological and spiritual measure, perhaps even a greater toll upon us. Much blood has been spilled in this struggle and, truth be said, no imminent success is yet visible to us.

A great portion of world Jewry in the twentieth century did not survive to see the beginnings of our redemption and restoration to sovereignty in our ancient homeland. Many others have now faltered in their resolution to see it through until reaching the Promised Land. Whereas the Jews leaving Egypt had dominant figures such as Moshe and Aharon to lead and inspire them our times and situation lack such towering personalities.

But that may be precisely what the rabbis meant when they stated; "We have no one that we can truly rely upon except for our Father in Heaven." Every generation experiences crises of faith and belief. Our generation which is witness to the death of all of the false ideals that permeated Jewish society over the past two centuries is truly left with no one to rely upon "except for our Father in Heaven."

But the prophet has assured us that "as the time when you left Egypt, so too now will you witness wonders and greatness." The bitter and costly process of redemption is upon us. May we be privileged to see its successful completion with great speed and minimum pain.