

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality

From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Bo)

Wake up an Israeli tank commander in the middle of the night and flash a picture of a BMP-1 APC (Armored Personnel Carrier) at a distance of 5 kilometers, when it appears to be little more than a speck in the distance, and he will instantly recognize it as a Soviet-made troop carrier that fires armor-piercing Sagger anti-tank missiles. He will also be able to rattle off to you their effective range, and threat capacity (the amount of time it takes to aim and fire, as well as which Israeli tanks will effectively pierce). He will also know instantly that this carrier is most likely to be seen in the Syrian theater of war.

The Israeli army takes the topic of enemy weaponry very seriously and has a variety of often-sadistic methods for ensuring that its commanders become extremely proficient in this particular expertise. I remember vividly the oft-repeated ritual of testing on this topic that took place every Friday morning during Tank Officer's Course, particularly as we were about to leave the base for our eagerly awaited weekend pass.

They would line us up for inspection in our dress uniforms, with our gear packed and the bus waiting to take us back to civilization, sometimes even letting the bus engines rev up so we could practically smell freedom, and then herd us into a side room for the dreaded exam.

Anyone not scoring a near-perfect score would be forced to stay behind to re-take the exam on Sunday morning. It is hard to describe the horrible depression that would descend on any cadet who failed this rigorous exam, as he was forced to watch everyone else board the bus for freedom while he stayed behind for a weekend of guard duty and kitchen detail. But it was hard to argue with the necessity for the perfection that was demanded; if you are in combat and the speck of a helicopter rises above a distant hilltop, you only have seconds to decide whether it is an Israeli Cobra, or a Syrian Gazelle (tank-killer), and mistakes or even hesitation in such a situation is what gets men killed.

A case in point was the terrible story of the tanks and men of Tank Officer's Course who served together as an armored battalion in the Lebanon war: seeing an approaching column of enemy tanks advancing through the dust clouds of the tank treads, the leading company commander opened fire and a pitched tank battle ensued.

Amidst the screams of the dying, one of the officers realized that both units were actually Israeli, and, unable to contact the unit opposite while ordering his own tanks to cease fire, he watched helplessly as his comrades continued to fire on his own men. Finally, one of the men disconnected his radio helmet, threw down his gun and ran, under fire, to the opposite leading tank.

Jumping up on top of the tank he grabbed the radio-helmet off the head of the startled tank commander and screamed into the other unit's frequency:

"Chadal! Atem horgim otanu!" "Cease fire! You're killing us!"

Years later, I met one of the men from this infamous tank battle, who still carried the scars of that terrible afternoon.

How do we live with the consequences of the mistakes we have made in life? Who among us does not occasionally look back and wish we had another chance to rectify the mistakes we made, and the paths we wish we had not traveled? If only we hadn't done this or tried that, how different life would be....

And yet, is that really so? If G-d really runs the world, then wasn't it all just part of the plan? Is there anything that has ever happened that wasn't just 'meant to be'?

This week's portion, *Bo*, contains a fascinating insight into Judaism's perspective on this particular issue.

One of the well-known questions that arise from the story of the Exodus from Egypt is the question of G-d's decision to "harden Pharaoh's heart". And at the beginning of this week's portion, the Torah actually seems to share with us the reasoning behind this perplexing plan for securing the Jewish people's release from Egypt:

"Va'yomer Hashem el Moshe: Bo ' el Paroh'; ki ' ani hichbadeti ' et libo ' ve'et lev avadav, le'ma'an shiti ototai eleh' be'kirbo'.

"U'le'ma'an te'saper be'oznei' binchah' u'ven binchah' et asher hita'lalti' be'mitzraim, ve'et ototai asher samti' vam, vi'yeda'atem ki' ani Hashem."

"And Hashem said to Moshe: Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened (made stubborn) his heart and the heart of his servants, so that I can put these, my signs, in his midst.

*"And so that you may tell over in the ears of your son, and your son's son, that which **I have done in (made a mockery of) Egypt, and the signs I have placed amongst (on) them, that you may know that I am Hashem.**" (Exodus 10:1-2)*

Apparently, there are two reasons as to why G-d hardens Pharaoh's heart, causing him to continue to deny the Jews their freedom, despite the logic of relenting in the face of the ever-worsening plagues:

Firstly, *"le'ma'an shiti ototai eleh' be'kirbo"* "so that I can put these, my signs, in his midst," may mean, as **Maimonides** suggests in his *Hilchot Teshuvah* (6:3), that Pharaoh's heart was hardened in order to further punish Pharaoh and Egypt for the evil they have wrought on the world in general, and the Jewish people in particular. Ultimately this has much to do with the need for consequences in this world, as well as practically destroying Egypt as a world power, which the world can no longer tolerate.

And secondly, *"U'le'ma'an te'saper be'oznei' binchah' u'ven binchah' et asher hita'lalti' be'Mitzraim, ve'et ototai asher samti' vam,"* "And so that you may tell over in the ears of your son, and your son's son, that which **I have done in (made a mockery of) Egypt, and the signs I have placed amongst (on) them,**" seems to be focused on Jewish education.

Somehow, causing Pharaoh (and the rest of Egypt) to stubbornly refuse to let the Jewish people go, will allow us to one day share with the coming generations all the things G-d did to Egypt, meaning all the plagues that caused the Egyptians to eventually let us go.

What exactly does this mean? Is this the opportunity to teach our children just how powerful G-d really is, as demonstrated by the never-ending display of plagues he visits upon the Egyptians?

Here too, Maimonides offers us some insight, suggesting that this is in fact the basis for *sippur yetzi'at mitzraim*, the mitzvah of telling over the story of the Exodus from Egypt every year at the Passover Seder. (*Hilchot Chametz U'Matzah* 7:1)

But we are still left with a few challenging questions: First of all, isn't this all really one reason? Why do we need to 'teach the Egyptians a lesson' and further destroy them (as suggested in the first reasoning) if not so that we can teach our children the consequences of evil and the might of G-d? And how is teaching our children that which Hashem has *done (hita'lalti)* to the Egyptians, different from teaching them about the signs placed amongst them?

One also wonders why G-d is telling Moshe to come to Pharaoh "*because*" He has hardened Pharaoh's heart. If indeed Pharaoh's heart is not allowing him to let the Jewish people go, then what is the point of Moshe going to see him?

Further, if indeed the point is to teach the coming generations the greatness of Hashem's power, why is that only accomplished if Pharaoh continues to refuse to allow the Jewish people to leave Egypt? Aren't the seven plagues already visited upon Egypt enough? Especially when bearing in mind that while G-d is 'playing games' with Egypt, the Jewish people are still enslaved there!

Even if we accept the opinion of the *Midrash* that at this point the Jews were no longer experiencing hard labor, as the Egyptians were far too distracted with their own pain to inflict any more upon the Jews, Hashem is still delaying the Exodus and thus the eventual giving of the Torah to the Jewish people and the world.

Why is our knowing how mighty G-d is worth delaying such a noble moment in history?

Additionally, it is worth noting that the result or point of this entire exercise seems to be:

"Vi'yeda'atem ki' ani Hashem."

"That you may know that I am Hashem." (Exodus 10: 2)

What does this mean? *Now* we are meant to know that this is G-d? Until now, through seven plagues, the Jewish people did not know that the source of all the plagues was and is Hashem? Are these final plagues the vehicle for us knowing that Hashem exists? In which case one would have to wonder why this had not been achieved until now?

All of which begs the larger question: what exactly is this entire 'game' all about? Why does G-d even need to orchestrate this entire 'Exodus show'? Why is there a need for any plagues at all? Why can't G-d just take the Jews out of Egypt and deposit them wherever He wants them to be? And in the same instant

He could destroy the Egyptians, saving all of this time and effort with the same results? Wouldn't the entire Jewish people - all three million of them- waking up in Israel have been miracle enough?

There is an idea that stems from **Rashi's** comments on this verse that may help us to arrive at a better understanding of this entire question.

In the verse:

*"U'le'ma'an te'saper be'oznei binchah u'ven binchah et asher **hita'lalti** be'Mitzraim,"*

*"And so that you may tell over in the ears of your son, and your son's son, that which **I have done** in Egypt,"*

Rashi seems to be struggling with the meaning of the word **hita'lalti**'. Normally, we might assume this word to mean actions, such as the actions of G-d described by Isaiah (Isaiah 12:4) in the psalm we say every Friday night:

*"Hodiu ba'amim **alilotav**," "Make known amongst the nations **His actions**."*

In which case, **hita'lalti** in our verse might refer to teaching our children all of the great miracles G-d **did** when visiting the plagues upon Pharaoh and the Egyptian people.

The only problem with this is that the verse (12:2) continues:

"Ve'et ototai asher samti vam,"

"And the signs I have placed amongst (on) them."

So if the second half of the verse clearly refers to G-d's miracles (Plagues), what are these '*things G-d has done*' in the first half of the verse?

Perhaps this is why Rashi shares a completely different understanding of the word **hita'lalti**, explaining that its meaning in our verse is:

"Sichakti', k'mo: "Hitalalta bi" (Numbers 22:29)... Ve'eino lashon poal u'me'olelim..." "I played with or mocked, as in the verse "You have mocked me" (which Bilaam says to his donkey in Numbers 22:29)... and it (the word hita'lalti in our verse) is not a language of action or actions..." (Rashi, Exodus 12:2 on the word "Hitalalti")

[In the verse Rashi quotes, regarding Bilaam's reaction to his donkey's talking, Rashi is clearly suggesting that the donkey (or G-d) is mocking Bilaam.]

Based on this Rashi, **Rav Avigdor Nevensahl**, in his *Sichot LeSefer Shemot*, suggests that the word means laughter, but of a very specific nature. There are really two types of laughter: the laughter of joy (such as when Avraham laughs at the news that he will have a son: Yitzchak), and the laughter of doubt or even ridicule (such as when Sarah laughs in the same story, seemingly considering the idea of giving birth at the age of ninety ridiculous).

Obviously, in our context, G-d cannot be laughing with joy at the demise of the Egyptians, His own creations. In fact, the Talmud points out that G-d silences the angels from singing at the destruction of the Egyptians in the Red Sea with the statement: *"My creations are drowning in the Sea, and you are singing?"* (Megillah 10b)

So Hashem's laughter is actually an expression of ridicule or dismissal, as if to say that the act of punishing the Egyptians into submission was nothing to G-d, a joke really. In fact, it was the Ten Plagues that demonstrated Hashem's power against the mightiest empire of the day; they were like toys before Him.

But in truth, this suggests some sort of contest or battle between G-d and Egypt, which is absurd; G-d has no 'opponents' because G-d is ultimately the source of all reality. Egypt only exists as an extension of G-d, who created them! So why does G-d have to 'brag' about His 'great victory'? That would be akin to a person breaking his own finger and bragging about how 'defeating' the finger was no effort at all!

Unless of course, the purpose of this 'ridicule' or 'dismissal' by G-d is precisely to prevent the illusion that there ever was a battle between Egypt and G-d in the first place.

And, since the very description of the Ten Plagues seems to imply such a struggle, it is important, suggests Rav Avigdor, we transmit to our children just how ridiculous that perception is. Indeed, this is the essence of what Egypt's and for that matter pagan idolatry's mistake was all about. Within the context of many gods who all do battle with each other, and who are worshipped based on what mankind receives in return, it is easy to fall into the illusion that if we can control our own destiny, as it were, we can also 'best' G-d.

What indeed is reality? Often, reality is a relative term. When our youngest son, Yair, was three years old, someone gave him a magnificent toy: an eighteen-wheeler truck large enough for him to lie on top of; he used to spend hours riding it all over the house. So, imagine he goes to sleep and dreams that he is driving his truck across the world; in a three-year-old's dream reality, highways can go anywhere such as Italy and Mexico and even South Africa. In his dream, he is really there, and that is his reality, and in fact that dream is part of his reality; scientists now know that brain cells are activated during our dreams, and he is really on a journey, though in reality it is a dream journey and not quite the reality he thinks he is experiencing.

Then, in the morning he wakes up and finds he is still in his bed, in his room, and perhaps he realizes that going to Mexico was a dream, but he may still think that the truck is very real. As adults, however, we know that the truck is just a toy, and very different from a real truck one might see on the highway. So, the adult's version of a toy may well be the child's perception of reality.

But in truth, even the truck on the highway is itself a toy, because we assume that trucks go places because we drive them, but if G-d really runs the world, then Hashem is really driving that truck, which may itself be an illusion.

Who really runs the world? Obviously, if G-d, who is endless and unlimited, created the world, then we get places because we are meant to be there and not because the truck takes us there. The truck is just the particular version of reality we are given to experience in this illusion.

And this is the true message of the Exodus from Egypt. In 'mocking' Egypt by virtue of the Ten Plagues, G-d is reminding us that the entire 'battle' is really an illusion. In reality, Hashem runs the world, and it is Hashem who is 'hardening' Pharaoh's heart, because for whatever reason, we are not yet meant to leave Egypt.

Ever wonder why so much energy in Judaism is devoted to remembering the Exodus from Egypt? Three times a day we say the *Shema* and remember that:

"Ani Hashem Elokeichem, aAsher hotzeiti eEtchem me'erezt Mitzraim, le'hiyot lachem le'Elokim..."
"I am the Lord your G-d, who took you out of Egypt to be for you a G-d..."

And every Friday night and Shabbat morning we make *Kiddush* and again remember that we were taken out of Egypt. And every morning we don our tefillin, and again are required to recall the Exodus from Egypt. Why is this an important event that we need to be reminded of it on such a regular basis?

Perhaps it is because this is the seminal experience that taught us that G-d really runs the world. Indeed, the Ten Plagues themselves are in fact a demonstration of the fact that all of nature is an illusion and that G-d is the only true reality: Blood turns to water, light becomes darkness, and water mixes with fire, because if Hashem runs the world, then all of nature is miraculous, and miracles are only natural.

And this is an extremely critical concept, because it changes the way we look at the world. So many people in this world are consumed with guilt for the mistakes they have made or the opportunities they have missed; a person having just gone through a difficult divorce struggles with the perception that he or she has somehow 'failed,' either because he or she has married the wrong person or because he or she didn't succeed in 'making it work.' But think about it: If G-d really runs the world, then if a person gets divorced, that must mean it was meant to happen. And while it is certainly true that we are meant to look into the future and imagine it is all dependent on us, it would be difficult to suggest that, in a world created by an omnipotent G-d, anything could ever have happened that was not part of G-d's plan.

This is why there is actually a mitzvah to get divorced with a Get, a Jewish divorce document. It may be a mitzvah many of us hope to never fulfill, but the fact that such a mitzvah exists means that sometimes (and in fact *every* time there is a divorce) it was just meant to be. Indeed, the couple that divorced were meant to meet, meant to marry, and meant to experience each other and then to get a divorce.

Maybe they needed to learn from that first marriage who they were meant to be in order to become better spouses in the marriages they subsequently discover, or maybe they met so that a child could come into the world; we may never know the answer to that question, but it was never a 'mistake.'

Imagine you are speeding, and someone crosses the street and you can't stop in time, and your car ploughs into the person and kills him; you live with the guilt of that terrible moment forever, right? Because if only you hadn't been speeding, that person would still be alive, right? But consider how ridiculous that is; we think a person dies only because our car hit him? Could a person be killed if G-d didn't want him to die? That person was meant to die, and our only question is why we ended up being the vehicle for that death.

Consider the sin of the Golden calf: biggest mistake in Jewish history, right? An event whose consequences we are still struggling with three thousand years later, right?

The Torah tells us that the reason for this catastrophe was:

"Va ya'ar ha'am ki' boshesh Moshe"

"And the people saw that Moshe tarried." (Exodus 32:1)

Rashi explains that the people miscalculated as to when the fortieth day was over and thought Moshe wasn't coming. In other words, the worst catastrophe in Jewish history happened because Moshe was late?! And while the Jewish people were building the Golden calf, Moshe was up on top of Sinai receiving the Torah from G-d, so why couldn't they just yell down the mountain that Moshe would be there tomorrow? The next day G-d tells Moshe to get down off the mountain *"because the people have become destructive..."* (32:7), so G-d couldn't tell him this a day early? And why did it take G-d forty days to transmit the Torah in the first place? Couldn't G-d have just given it all to Moshe via Palm-tablets in one afternoon?

For that matter, why were the Jewish people at Sinai in the first place? Why didn't they go straight up the Egyptian Coast North toward Israel? They would have been in Israel inside of a week! The Torah tells us that G-d did not take the Jewish people via the territory of the Philistines *"lest they see war and want to return to Egypt"* (13:17), so instead, He takes them all the way around via the desert, where they arrive at the Red Sea, and see... the entire Egyptian Army chasing them! And indeed they want to... return to Egypt! In point of fact, if they had gone up the coast, the Egyptians would never have caught them! So what is the game?

The truth is, the Golden calf was meant to happen, just like the Jewish people (and the Egyptians) were meant to experience the splitting of the Sea, because the generation that left Egypt was not ready and was never meant to enter the land of Israel; they were meant to die in the desert so that a second generation, born in freedom and free of the slave mentality of their parents' generation, could conquer the land.

So if the sin of the Golden calf was always meant to happen, what did the Jewish people do that was so wrong? What is it that we are atoning for through thousands of years of exile?

There is a statement in the Talmud that presents us with a fascinating perspective on this entire issue: *"Resh Lakish says: Teshuvah (repentance) done in love transforms our zedonot, our purposeful transgressions, into zechuyot, or merits." (Yoma 86b)*

How can this be? Because the real mistakes we make are not in what we *do*, but rather in what we *want* to do. It was the fact that we *wanted* to worship a Golden calf, wherein lay our undoing. Ultimately, the only true choice we have in this world is how we choose to view the world, which is wrapped up in what we really want to do.

And if our mistakes are about what we want, then when we change what we want, we change who we are, transforming our iniquities into merits.

Ultimately, our ability to recognize that Hashem really runs the world is the determining factor in whether we succeed in achieving our purpose, which is really about tapping into what we could and really should want in this world. If G-d runs the world, then all we really need to want is to fulfill whatever we decide Hashem really wants of us.

And this was the lesson we needed to learn, as we left the world of Egypt behind. The reality of Egypt is governed by the illusion that the laws of nature rule the world and control our destiny. The result of that illusion is that the very things that are really pre-determined vehicles for us to achieve our purpose (such as money, power or any of the many gifts we are given in life) instead become the purpose and the goals by which we govern our lives.

Three thousand years later, we still live in a world very much immersed in the illusion of ancient Egypt. It is only when we succeed in connecting to the reality of a world created by G-d that we can move beyond the question of what will happen, and move on to the true challenge of figuring out why; why indeed are the events we experience given to us, and how do they help us to achieve our purpose? This, indeed, is the true challenge for which the Jewish people came into the world.

Thus, G-d tells Moshe to come to Pharaoh "*because*" He has hardened Pharaoh's heart: The fact that it is G-d who decides when Pharaoh will let the Jewish people go is a demonstration that it is G-d who really runs the world, and this is the essence of Moshe's mission: to help the Jewish people leave behind the illusion of the pagan world of Egypt.

Before the Jewish people leave Egypt, they must see the illusion of the Egyptian way of life completely destroyed. And today, every person who still believes that life is about making money, instead of seeing money as a vehicle to give life, is still living in Egypt.

This is also why the verses we originally quoted conclude with the statement "*Vi'yeda'atem ki' ani Hashem.*" Now we will know G-d, because we will rediscover Him as the source of all reality, which is the pre-requisite for our leaving Egypt.

As we go through life, striving to make the world a better place, and struggling with all the harsh realities around us, the constant reminder of the Egyptian Exodus helps us to recall that all the experiences that come our way need not overwhelm us so much as present us with opportunities to act as partners in creating a world with more room for G-d.

Perhaps some day soon we will all merit to arrive at a new reality, where the illusion of a random, G-dless world will give way to the reality of a world where every human being has a purpose, and every event is recognized as being part of one great symphony of love, brotherhood and understanding.

In the meantime, perhaps this Shabbat we will merit one more taste of what that world could truly be like.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Binny Freedman