

## **A Weekly Byte... from Isralight**

(Portion of Shemot)

*Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

*Only a few short months had passed since his untimely death, but already, Imanuel Moreno had become a legend.*

*A Lieutenant-Colonel and a commander in the elite Sayeret Matkal Commando unit, Imanuel was killed on a Friday night in August 2006 in heavy fighting near the Baalbeck area in Lebanon.*

*That Saturday night, at two o'clock in the morning, thousands of people came to Mount Herzl, Israel's National Military cemetery, to accompany him on his final journey.*

*A graduate of the Zionist religious High School system (Himmelfarb and Hartmann) and member of the modern Zionist Bnei Akiva youth movement, he had an enormous impact on all those who served with him and under him.*

*One of his comrades in arms told the following story about him after the funeral:*

*As was tradition prior to boarding the helicopter which would carry the commandos to their mission in enemy territory, Moreno quizzed his men and comrades on what the solutions to every possible scenario might be. And when they had exhausted the military options, he took it to the next level. Turning to one of the officers who served with him in the unit he asked:*

*"Given the possibility that we could be hit by an anti-aircraft missile and find ourselves plummeting to the ground, what would you do if you absolutely knew you only had five seconds left to live?"*

*His comrade's response was that he wasn't sure; he would probably be so consumed with sadness and fear that he might just close his eyes and wait for it to end.*

*"And what would you do?" asked the officer of Moreno.*

*"I would recite the Shema (the prayer which Jews have died with on their lips through the ages) responded Moreno.*

*"The Shema? What would be the point of that?" asked the other officer.*

*"After all, you know you are dying, what will saying the Shema do for you now? Whatever faith you have, you have; what difference will 5 more seconds of saying the Shema make? Do you really believe saying the Shema will change the outcome of the crash?"*

*"No, you don't understand" replied Moreno.*

*"If you have five seconds left to live and you don't think they are worth living, then that calls into question the entire life you have lived until now, and whether you have really made of it what you were meant to."*

*"But if you understand that even the last 5 seconds of your life are given you for a purpose, then that means your entire life has been worth living...."*

How does one make life meaningful? How do we make sure that we are living every moment to its fullest potential?

And more, how does a person facing certain death even contemplate appreciating the last moments of his life as a gift rather than becoming completely immersed in the bitterness of the fact that it is all about to be taken away?

This week's portion, **Shemot**, contains a powerful indication to Judaism's recipe for a meaningful and joyful life.

At the beginning of this week's portion, we find the family of Ya'acov, transitioning from being a family to becoming a nation, as strangers in the land of Egypt. It is interesting to wonder whether they ever began to feel, given their relationship with no less than the Viceroy of Egypt, at home in Egypt? One wonders whether they started to enjoy Egyptian culture whilst becoming immersed in Egyptian society, and even contributing to the Egyptian economy and social structure.

Whether they began to feel at home or not, one thing is abundantly clear from the text: they are about to suffer a rude awakening. A new Pharaoh arises in Egypt, who has no love for the Jews nor any recognition of their contribution to Egyptian society, and the comfortable lives of the children of Israel gradually descends into a spiral of agony and horror, until they find themselves at the lowest strata of a slave society where people become numbers and human beings are measured for the value of their work output.

It is interesting to note that among other things, the beginning of this week's portion presents with the recipe for the rise of Anti-Semitism, beginning with a society that becomes more verbal that we as a Jewish culture are different, to a loss of civil and social rights, and concluding with the empire of evil that was ancient Egypt but could just have easily have read as the rise of National Socialism in what became Nazi Germany not so long ago.

One wonders, when considering this horrible recipe, where it actually begins? Is there an initial hint or indication that something has gone awry, which should cause our antennae to sense that something is amiss?

Interestingly, the Torah is actually very clear on this point. The entire story of the enslavement of the Jewish people and the morass of evil that ensues begins with one very specific occurrence:

*"And a new King arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph"*  
*"Vayakam Melech chadash al mitzrayim asher lo' yada' et Yosef."* (Exodus (*Shemot*) 1:8)

The rabbis debate (see Rashi et al.) how a King of Egypt could have no knowledge of who Joseph was, such that some view this King as the same ruler who conveniently 'decides' not to know. The result however is the same, the 'protectsia' the Jews were relying on suddenly and brutally disappears. And the root of this insidious beginning lies in the fact that Pharaoh has no gratitude whatsoever for the great service the Jewish people through Joseph, have done both Egypt in general, as well as Pharaoh's monarchy in particular.

All of which is quite incredible. How could a Pharaoh living in the time immediately following Joseph's death even be able to pretend he does not know who Joseph was? And even if this was in fact a new King, how could the Egyptian people allow such a convenient 'amnesia' to take place? And, perhaps even more critically, why would they behave in this fashion? Why

would anyone want to avoid recognizing all the good Joseph had done for Egypt in saving it from seven years of famine and ensuring its survival as the Empire of the time?

And make no mistake about it: this is not just an ancient phenomenon. Seventy five years ago, the Holocaust began because an entire society did not feel any sense of gratitude towards a generation of Jews who fought in her defense in World War I, as well as playing a critical role in the gradual financial rebirth of Germany's bankrupt post WWI economy.

And today, a generation of Arabs are so quick to forget that one hundred and fifty years ago, Jews were buying up land that had been stagnating as swampland for centuries and clearing it of disease-giving mosquitoes, as well as providing thousands of jobs to Arabs who began to flock to what was then Palestine by the thousands in search of a better life.

It seems that the beginning of the story of Egyptian servitude is really about ingratitude, which is very important, because the Torah suggests again and again, that the root of all the mistakes we make in this world actually begins with that same sense of ingratitude, described as 'Kefiyat haTov', or 'denial of good' in Jewish rabbinic literature.

Indeed, a closer look at the first sin or mistake made in human history suggests this very idea. Most people assume that Adam and Eve are exiled from the Garden of Eden because they ate from the Tree of Knowledge which was forbidden them. However, they are not immediately expelled from the Garden after eating the forbidden fruit. Hashem (G-d) first has a fascinating conversation with them (see Genesis (Bereishit) chapter 3) asking both Adam and Eve why they ate from the forbidden tree. And it is only after Adam responds: "*The woman you gave me tempted me and I ate*" that they are forced to leave the Garden.

The real mistake (*chet*) of Adam and Eve was that they did not appreciate the gifts they were given by G-d. In blaming his mistake on Eve, and suggesting (at least in a literal understanding of the story) that since G-d 'gave' him woman, He (G-d) was partially responsible; Adam seems to take chutzpah to a new level!

Not only does Adam not appreciate the incredible gift that such a life partner obviously represents, but he actually is so ungrateful in that moment as to suggest he would have been better off without her!

And this phenomenon appears again and again in the Torah.

Witness, as an example, the generation of Jews in the desert who actually *complain* about the *Manna* that falls from heaven every day (*Bamidbar* (Numbers) 11:6)! How could any sane person actually resent the gift that Manna represents?

Imagine: Hashem is giving you this magic bread, which in Rabbinic legend actually acquires any taste so desired by the consumer, and you are given this bread, every day without fail, and all you have to do is walk outside your tent in the morning and pick it up, and you are now complaining about this? You are bored with this? How could this be?

Understand that this question is at the root of human behavior, because if the Torah is pointing out that this mistake is at the root of the first great exile, it means that this character flaw is the root of all exile, both nationally, as well as in our personal lives, even today.

Think about it: we are blessed to live in time where 'manna' falls from heaven every day. Fresh food delivered yesterday from the grocer is sitting in our refrigerator, and we simply put it in the

microwave and are sitting down to eat not five minutes after deciding we were hungry. And yet we complain, because the bread gets hard too quickly after being 'nuked'.

We get into our cars to get to work, barely conscious of the fact that there are hundreds of millions of people in the world who have no work, much less a car, and that no more than a hundred years ago, it would have taken days to reach a destination we can commute to every day, and yet we complain because a traffic jam causes us a half hour delay.

And then of course, there is the real 'manna': You come home annoyed at your wife because she parked your car in the wrong spot or left the lights on, and actually forget what an incredible gift it is in today's world that you are coming home to a woman who decided, for whatever the reason, that you are actually the person she wants to spend the rest of her life with. How is it that we get so blinded to the incredible *manna* Hashem rains down in our lives, every single day? How is it we get angry and complain about the little and even not-so-little things our children may do, and forget how many people desperately wish, every day to have such problems? And even if you are still looking for that special person in your life, but still get annoyed about the leak in the bathroom, forgetting how just sixty years ago, Jews in Europe could only dream about having their own bathroom let alone an apartment with food in the fridge...?

And of course, let's not forget that after two thousand years of dreaming to have our own homeland, we live in a time where we can board a jet for \$1,000 and arrive in Jerusalem the same day, and yet the overwhelming majority (82%!) of today's Jews have never even visited Israel once!

How can people, all of us, become so blatantly ungrateful? What is the root of *Kefiyat HaTov*?

**Rav Avigdor Nevehnsahl**, in his *Sichot L'Sefer Shemot*, suggests that there are a variety of reasons people are uncomfortable with gratitude, but mostly they boil down to one point: we don't want to feel we owe anyone or anything; we want to feel we can do it alone.

And to avoid admitting that we owe or need anyone or anything, we create a variety of rationalizations to avoid appreciating and recognizing the good others do for us.

After all, when someone does you a favor, how can you not recognize that you owe them? How does a person deny the good so obviously done for them? People think:

*'Well, he did me a favor, but I've more than paid him back; in fact, he really owes me!!', or:*

*'What did he really do for me? For him it was no effort at all!' or:*

*'This is a favor? I could have done without it!' or:*

*'He was really doing this for himself; the fact it helped me was a side point, so I don't owe him anything!', or:*

*'No matter how much he'll ever do for me, it doesn't come close to the good I've done for him!'*

But all these rationalizations are really an attempt to avoid having to admit that we need each other and that we owe each other. This character trait is destructive not just because of how it affects your fellow human being who has done you a service, nor even just because it prevents us from growing closer together in harmony as families, communities, nations, and even as a global village; this character trait of ingratitude is actually destructive to the soul, because every time a person is ungrateful, it becomes that much easier to be ungrateful the next time,

ultimately causing him or her to forget how much we owe and should be grateful to our Creator, who put us here in the first place.

And of course when I don't feel I owe anyone or anything my existence and all the good that is in my life, then all that I do becomes about me, because I don't owe anyone anything....

And this, says the Torah, was Egypt's great mistake. The root of all ingratitude is selfishness; I don't want to owe anyone anything because I think or want it to be all about me. So Pharaoh, and with him the Egyptians, begin to rationalize: what did Joseph and the Jews do after all? We granted them a safe haven here in Egypt, and even gave them their own land in Goshen! In fact, they really owe us!

Just like the Germans in the early twentieth century who felt they had given the Jews a safe haven for too long and have given them jobs and respectability so we owe them nothing; in fact they owe us!

Now, on the one hand, this may stem from the fact that we are created in the image of G-d, and therefore we aspire to be G-d-like; and just as Hashem is truly independent, we want to be independent as well, so we are embarrassed to admit that we need help from others. But at the root of it all, Judaism suggests that this is a destructive character trait which needs to be rooted out.

And so, hidden in the roots of the Jewish people's redemption from Egypt is the very antidote to this '*kfiyat hatov*' or ingratitude. And that is, quite simply, *hakarat hatov*, or gratitude.

Judaism suggests that this character trait is so important for every human being to develop, that it is even worth practicing it on nature, and even on inanimate objects.

After two hundred years of slavery, when Hashem visits the first of ten plagues upon the Egyptians by turning the Nile into a river of blood (perhaps symbolically demonstrating that the Nile river which was the god of Egypt, called the *Yeor* in bible was not really the source of light (Or) in the world but actually the source of death...) it is Aaron who actually sets this plague in motion.

And this, say the rabbis, was because Moshe, eighty years earlier, was actually saved as a baby (from Pharaoh's decree to drown all the Jewish male babies) by the waters of the Nile River! Obviously this is not because Moshe does not want to offend the Nile! It is because the development of gratitude as a character trait is so critical, that Hashem wants Moshe to practice gratitude even on the Nile River.

And for the same reason Moshe also does not set forth the frogs to come from the Nile, nor is he G-d's vehicle for the plague of lice which begin by throwing dirt into the air, out of respect for the fact that Moshe used the dirt to cover the Egyptian he killed, thus escaping Egyptian retribution. Imagine: Moshe 'owes' even the dirt! But of course if you practice owing the dirt you will have no problem knowing that you owe your fellow human being.

*Rav Nevehnsahl shares an amazing story about **Rav Ze'ev Gustman**, the Rosh Yeshiva of Netzach Yisrael Yeshiva in Jerusalem who passed away in 1991, and was one of the great and holy men of the last generation; a legend in his time. (Rav Gustman was actually one of the judges (dayanim) who sat on Rav Chaim Ozer Grodzinsky's Beit Din (court) in Vilna, an unheard of honor for someone so young and an indication of his great stature even then.) When the Nazis gathered all the Jews of Vilna together for their final journey, Rav Gustman succeeded miraculously in hiding in one of the bushes in his back yard, from where he*

*succeeded in escaping to the forest where he hid with his wife and daughter for the remainder of the war. Until two years before his death, Rav Gustman continued to personally water the plants in the yeshiva courtyard every day in recognition of the fact that a simple bush had saved his life fifty years earlier in Vilna....*

Incidentally, this is also a critical trait for real leadership. How often do we encounter politicians and community leaders who think the people 'owe' them, for all the community service they provide and good that they do. How easy it would have been for Moshe to feel the Jews owed him for coming back to Egypt and being the vehicle to set them free. Yet, it is quite clear that Moshe understands how much he owes the Jewish people, who are the vehicle for his fulfilling his mission here on earth and whose faith allowed him to become all that he was meant to be....

Indeed, the **Sefer haChinuch** explains that this very gratitude is the root of the mitzvah to honor one's parents, because no matter what a person's relationship with his or her parents, we still owe them everything because they decided to bring us into this world in the first place; in partnership with G-d, they gave us life itself. So how do you ever repay that?

And of course, the closer we are to someone, the more difficult it is to demonstrate this sense of gratitude, which makes it that much more important.

Most of all, we need to understand that displaying gratitude is not because the other person needs it; after all, Hashem doesn't need our gratitude. We have to develop the trait of gratitude because we need it; because being grateful makes us better people and makes the world a better place to be, and makes room for Hashem in our life, which is, in the end, what we are all doing here in the first place.

Of course, once we begin to see the world differently, this ability to see the good we need to appreciate in our lives begins to manifest itself everywhere we look.

For example, there is an amazing *Midrash* (rabbinic legend) regarding the daughters of *Yitro* (Jethro, who will become Moshe's father-in-law) who are recounting for their father how 'an Egyptian' (referring to Moshe who, because he is still a fugitive hiding his identity they assume to be an anonymous Egyptian) saved them from the shepherds at the well. The *Midrash* says they are really referring to the Egyptian Moshe killed back in Egypt who was the reason Moshe had to run and thus the cause of his being there at the well in Midyan to save them!

In other words, Moshe and thus the daughters of Yitro are grateful even for that wicked Egyptian who was trying to murder a Jewish slave, simply because he became the vehicle for their salvation!

This was the essence of who Joseph was as well. When the brothers are afraid of Joseph's wrath upon encountering him twenty- two years after having sold him as a slave and left him for dead, Joseph is actually grateful to the brothers for having been the vehicle G-d chose to allow him to save them along with an entire country!

Precisely because Joseph represented the essence of constantly appreciating all the good Hashem is constantly giving us, even when we don't see it that way, the Egyptian only begins after Joseph is dead and the Egyptians can conveniently 'forget ' him.....

*In the end, I don't know what Imanuel Moreno's last words were. But nine years ago, when a suicide bomber walked into the S'barro's pizzeria and blew himself up murdering fifteen people*

*in the process, I know what the last words of a certain Mr. Shevradnuder were. Lying in the wreckage of what had been a peaceful pizzeria on a beautiful Jerusalem afternoon Mr. Shevradnuder managed to move his hand far enough to clasp his five year old son's hand lying next to him. With his wife and two of his other children already dead, he must have known both of them were about to leave this world and with the five seconds he had left, he chose to recite the Shema together with his young son. And in those five seconds, the two of them lived a lifetime.*

*I will always wonder what he was thinking, this young father seeing his son in such pain, was he somehow, in an amazing display of faith able to be thankful for those last five seconds, along with the life he had been given instead of leaving this world bitter about the life he was losing?*

All I know for sure, is that it is no accident that Judaism begins the day with the Modeh Ani prayer, and that the first word we say every day, before anything else, is simply 'thanks'. We choose, in every second of every minute of our lives, whether to appreciate what we have, or to bemoan what we are missing. And in so doing, we actually choose not what we have but how we have it, and who we are.

May Hashem bless all of us with the strength and wisdom to appreciate all the gifts we have in this world, because that is the first step in making the world the place we want it to be.

Shabbat Shalom,

Binny Freedman