

A Weekly Byte... from Isralight

(Portion of Va'era)

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality
From **Rav Binny Freedman**

Are we here because we have made the right choices, or have all the right choices really been made for us?

It was meant to be a routine patrol which, but for this incident, would long have been forgotten. We were on reserve duty during the Intifada (the original Intifada, back in 89') doing a jeep patrol in a small Arab village called Azun.

The three of us represented a standard cross-section of Israeli society: Shimon Kachlon, a bank-teller, Rami, an electrician who worked for Bezek (Israel's phone company), and myself, a teacher. It has always been my custom to say the special prayer for the journey (Tefillat Ha'Derech) before every patrol, and this one was no exception. Though both Rami and Kachlon defined themselves as secular Jews (assuming a person wearing an Israeli army uniform can ever be secular), both instinctively covered their heads with their hands as I intoned the traditional prayer.

We had been on patrol for about an hour when we suddenly heard a loud 'bang!' that sounded like a gunshot, coming from our left. In the movies, the soldiers always manage to immediately return heavy bursts of automatic fire in such situations, but in real life that would have been ridiculous. You don't know exactly where the shots are coming from, you are not yet sure they are firing at you, and you are not even sure the noise is actually a gunshot. The next thing that happens in the movies is usually that the jeep stops on the spot and the soldiers pile out, often continuing to fire as they close in on the enemy. In reality, however, standard operating procedure is actually to do exactly the opposite of what your instinct as a soldier seems to demand. Instead of braking and returning fire with an eye towards taking out, or at least capturing the would-be terrorist, you are actually trained to hit the gas and drive another fifty yards before stopping, the idea being to get out of range of whoever is firing at you before responding. (Most often, stopping on the spot, would leave you in the enemy's 'kill-zone' and would actually be the worst thing you could do.)

So, while craning my neck around to try and locate the source of the gunshots, I screamed "full gas!" at Rami (who was driving) and grabbed the radio mike to let Battalion know we were (perhaps?) under fire. The jeep we were in was one of the older American versions, with the back seat facing forward instead of facing to the rear (a more practical, Israeli innovation.), and Kachlon started shouting: "Yorim Aleinu! Ra'iti Et HaKadur!" ("They're shooting at us and I saw the bullet!")

He would later swear he actually saw the bullet pass between us, but I was still ignoring him with an eye towards getting my men to safe cover and responding as quickly as possible.

Another illusion on the silver screen is the idea of returning fire from the jeep; in reality, you can't hit the side of a barn, much less a solitary target most probably behind a good,

selected cover position, and any return fire was complicated as well by the fact that we were in the middle of an Arab village, so stray bullets were something you wanted to avoid, if possible.

By the time our jeep swerved across the road facing the area the shot (shots?) had come from, and took cover behind the now-open jeep doors, there was only silence. Thank G-d, no one was hit, and after waiting a moment to try and spot our assailant, we finally began to advance towards the spot on the road where the shot had been fired. The entire process from the first and only shot fired, until we arrived back at where we had been, took no more than a couple of minutes, but by the time we got there, whoever had fired was long gone.

Calling back to Rami, who had remained with the jeep (and the radio) I told him to call off any support vehicles, as there wasn't anything to pursue, at which point I began to wonder whether we had really been fired upon. We found neither shell casings, nor any bullet holes in any of the surrounding buildings on either side of the road, and Rami also started wondering whether what we had heard was really a gunshot. But Kachlon absolutely insisted he had actually seen the bullet pass through the jeep in between us, and only when we got back to the jeep did we find a neat little bullet hole on both sides of the jeep tarp, indicating, indeed, that a bullet had miraculously passed through the jeep no more than six inches behind my head.

From that day on, both Rami and Kachlon absolutely refused to go out on patrol with anyone else but me, and they would not leave the gates of the base until I had finished reciting the prayer for the journey (Tefillat Ha'Derech), which they insisted was the miraculous source of their salvation.

So often, one wonders, are we making choices that put us in the right place at the right time? Are we spared (or given) the tragedies that are often but a hair's breadth away, simply by virtue of making the right decisions, or are all these decisions really made for us? Is there some master plan, and has G-d long ago decided when, where, and how we will face whatever challenges we need to face?

Am I still here because we happened to hit the gas at the right time? Or does G-d orchestrate it all, with the end-result a foregone conclusion? Were we ever really in any danger? Or has G-d mapped it all out since the birth of time?

This question, perhaps, is one of the challenges of this week's portion, *Va'era*.

The story of the exodus from Egypt is a classic that we all grew up with. Back then, it seems, it was so much simpler: there were the good guys and the bad guys, and when Moses and Aaron squared off against Pharaoh and the evil empire of Egypt, you never had any trouble with who you were supposed to be rooting for. After all, Pharaoh was the villain everyone loves to hate, right? And how could you not scorn a fellow who is asked to let your people go, and refuses, in the face of one plague after another? Not only has he enslaved an entire people, and sunken to a point where babies are being tossed into the Nile river, and not only does he refuse to see that G-d Himself (Herself? Itself?) is demanding His people's release, by demonstrating miraculous inexplicable events. But he refuses to see this time after time after time, through ten plagues! So he must be evil incarnate, right?

Except for one small detail: G-d has already told Moshe that: he will harden Pharaoh's heart, so the fact that Pharaoh refuses to let the Jews go free is completely irrelevant!

“And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and I will multiply my signs and miracles in the land of Egypt. And Pharaoh will not listen to you....” (Exodus 7:3-4)

So, if Pharaoh's heart is hardened by G-d, one wonders why he is held accountable for his refusal to free the Jewish people! After all, the scenario seems to be that Moshe and Aaron ask Pharaoh to free the Jewish people, Pharaoh refuses, so G-d brings a plague forth against the Egyptians. And every time Pharaoh refuses to set them free, G-d brings another plague. But if G-d has hardened Pharaoh's heart, then he doesn't really choose to keep the Jews enslaved, so he should not be suffering the consequence of the next plague!

In fact, one wonders what the purpose of all the plagues is to begin with. Certainly, G-d does not need to get Pharaoh's permission to let the Jewish people go! And if the point of the exercise was simply to free the Jewish people, then like Barbara Eden in *I Dream of Jeannie*, Hashem, in the blink of an eye, could simply transport the Jewish people out of Egypt! What need was there for the entire exodus story to begin with?

And for that matter, even the choices Pharaoh and the Egyptians made to enslave the Jewish people in the first place were not really their own free choice, because way back in the time of Abraham, G-d tells Abraham that he should know that:

“... Your offspring shall be strangers in a land that is not their own, and they will be enslaved, and made to suffer....” (Genesis 15:13)

If Hashem had already determined, far in advance, that the Jewish people would be enslaved in Egypt, how could the Egyptians then be held accountable for what they never chose to do? G-d chose it for them before they were even born!

Indeed, one wonders what the purpose of this entire exercise was in the first place, which is the strangest part of all, because the Torah actually tells us why Hashem hardens Pharaoh's heart time after time:

“Ve'Hirbeti Et Ototai, Ve'Et Moftai Be'Eretz Mitzraim...”
“And I will multiply my signs and miracles in the land of Egypt....” (7:3)

In other words, G-d wants to show off! And somehow, this whole process is to let everyone know how awesome G-d really is, and that He can 'take' or defeat the Egyptians time after time. But that is ridiculous! Is this crushing, as it were, of Egypt somehow meant to show that Hashem, G-d, is all-powerful and can defeat even Egypt, the mightiest empire the world had ever known? Are we somehow meant to view this story as a battle between Egypt (and Pharaoh) and Hashem? Could anything be more absurd?

Was there a battle here? How can anyone or anything do 'battle' with G-d, who is the source of all reality? Egypt can no more be G-d's opponent than my own pen can begin to argue with the hand that holds it! Egypt (and Pharaoh) is created by G-d, and serves Hashem's purpose, so what is this all about?

At the beginning of next week's portion, (*Bo*), the Torah makes it abundantly clear:

“...For I have hardened Pharaoh’s heart... in order to place my signs in him (in his heart). And in order that you will tell over in the ears of your sons and your sons’ sons, that which I have done (“**Hita’lalti**”) in Egypt, and the signs that I have placed in them, and you will know that I am G-d.” (10:1-2)

Apparently then, all of this is in order that somehow everyone should see G-d’s miracles. Which leads us to wonder what the purpose of *that* really is?

In short, we need to understand the meaning of choice, and the role our choices play in what seems to be our choiceless-ness before G-d. And maybe such an understanding, or at least a perspective, will help to shed some light on what the story of the exodus from Egypt is really all about.

So what does it mean to choose?

The **Ramban** (Rav Moshe Ben Nachman, one of the greatest of the 12th century Spanish Commentators) points out that in the end, the Torah does not say G-d hardened Pharaoh’s heart in the first plague, and in fact, in the first five plagues. Rather, the text suggests that Pharaoh hardened *his own* heart. (See 7:13,22; 8:15, 28 and 9:7)

And this, suggests the Ramban, is the whole point. Everything we do is governed by the choices we make, and if we had no freedom of choice, then there would be no value to anything we do. And we always have freedom of choice, and that is why we are accountable for the results of those choices.

However, the Ramban points out, the choices we make also remove our ability to choose. The best example of this is probably the scenario of addiction. The first time a person uses heroin, he is clearly making a choice, and he is free to decide whether he wants to try heroin, and ignore whatever warnings he has heard, or not. However, every time he uses heroin, he has a little less ability to resist it, until finally, he is addicted and has completely removed his ability to choose not to use it. And he has so removed his ability to choose that he actually cannot break his addiction on his own, without a rehab program. And this, as well, is the nature of evil. A person can sink so far down the path of evil, that he or she no longer has the ability to choose not to commit evil. Such a person has made choices that have removed his ability to choose.

This, suggests the Ramban, is exactly what happens in the case of Pharaoh. With each successive plague, Pharaoh’s choices actually remove his ability to choose, until eventually he has sunken so low and gone so far down the path of evil, that he can no longer choose good. Hence, in the first five plagues the Torah depicts Pharaoh as hardening his own heart, but in the last five plagues, the Torah describes Pharaoh’s heart as being hardened by G-d. One might suggest that G-d does not remove Pharaoh’s free choice; Pharaoh does that to himself, all on his own.

But this does not explain why G-d goes to all this trouble; what are these plagues, and all these miracles, really all about?

Perhaps the point of this entire exercise is to expose, as it were, the very absurdity that lies at the root of our question.

How, indeed, could Pharaoh imagine that the Creator of Heaven and Earth, who can turn rivers into blood, and blot out the sun, and who, indeed, is all the source of all life, can be ignored?

Indeed, **Rashi** (10:2) suggests that the word “**Hita’lalti**” does not mean that G-d performed miracles, but rather that through these signs G-d was actually ridiculing the Egyptians. (As in, for example, when Bilaam suggests that his donkey is ridiculing him (“**Ki Hitalalt’ Bi**”) in Numbers 22:29)

Indeed, it may be that the very perception that these are miracles at all is what is at the root of all of this ridicule.

In the end, we live, to a certain degree, in a world of illusion. Once you accept that Hashem is the source of all reality, indeed is all reality, then why are miracles such a big deal? After all, if G-d runs the world, then the fact that He does miracles is only natural. All of nature is really miraculous!

I recall an incredible series of coincidences that to me were nothing short of miraculous. A student had been desperate to speak with me, and we finally managed to connect in New York the day before I was scheduled to return to Israel.

There was a woman who had been going through a very difficult time for nearly eight years, as her husband had left her, but could not be found, leaving her unable to receive a Get (a traditional Jewish divorce document). Such a woman is known in Jewish tradition as an Agunah, literally chained in her terrible set of circumstances, unable to remarry until she manages to gain a proper Jewish divorce.

Jewish tradition considers efforts to free a woman of such circumstances by helping her procure a divorce, a mitzvah of the highest order. So when this student explained the circumstances, I naturally said I would do everything I could, though having no idea how I would be able to make any headway under the circumstances. The husband was living in Israel, but had not been heard from in nearly five years.

However, based on the story, and the description of the individuals who might know where the husband was currently residing, I had one idea of a fellow who might know one of the individuals who might be able to find this recalcitrant husband.

I had not seen the fellow I was thinking of in nearly fifteen years, since my army days, and had no idea how on earth I would find him, but I promised I would try.

The next day, as we were boarding the plane to Israel, I was shocked to see this very same fellow, with whom I had long since lost contact boarding my flight with his family! I caught him just before we were about to board and told him I was amazed he was on my plane, as I had to speak with him, and he agreed to come to my seat once his kids were asleep. Between his kids, and my exhaustion, I finally found him about an hour before we were due to land, and told him my story, explaining that I thought he might know one of the fellows who might be able to find this husband. At which point he began to laugh. Because this very same fellow, as it turned out was also on this very same flight! So he promised me he would come back to my seat and help me find this second fellow as soon as he finished helping his kids with their breakfasts.

So imagine my surprise when, a few moments later, he found me in my seat and started laughing again, because this second fellow... was actually seated one row behind me! (In the end, when I put him in touch with the family of this woman, he was able to help facilitate a Jewish divorce, freeing this woman to re- marry).

About two weeks after this incredible story, back in Israel, I happened to catch a ride with Rav Yehuda Amital (shlita), one of the great Torah scholars of our generation, (whose Yeshiva I was privileged to study in), and I told him this story. His response, which has stayed with me, was:

*“Atah Mevi Li’ Ra’ayah She’HaKadosh Baruch Hu’ Manhig Et Ha’Olam?”
“You are bringing me a proof that G-d runs the world?”*

In other words, we seem to need such incredible stories to affirm that G-d is running the show, but in truth, every story, and indeed every moment of every day, is as much an affirmation of G-d as any other.

We think that there is nature, and then sometimes G- d performs miracles. But in truth, all of nature is miraculous, and one person’s natural occurrence is another person’s miracle.

In the end, the greatest choice we have is how we choose to look at the world. And that freedom is what the entire story of the exodus from Egypt is all about.

In the case of the ten plagues, Hashem turns nature on its ear: water, the symbol of life in the Torah (and in which we immerse ourselves, in a Mikveh, or ritual bath, in response to contact with death) became blood, the symbol of death (hence the prohibition against partaking of the blood of even Kosher animals). Fire and Water are mixed together in the hail, and light and darkness exist together in the same place and time.

Because nature is not a tool of G-d, rather, G-d is everywhere in nature, if only we will open our eyes.

And in the end, if we could truly see Hashem everywhere in the world that we looked, then we would never have been able to enslave other human beings in the first place.

This is the meaning of all of the verses proclaiming the goal of this exercise:

“And Egypt shall know that I am G-d” (7:5, 17; 8:19 ;) And, indeed:

“in order that you (Egypt) shall know that there is none like me in the Land.” (9:14)

Ancient Egypt worshipped nature, as a tool of many gods. But Hashem meant to teach the world, that nature is a manifestation of Hashem, if we could only learn to see.

This is perhaps our greatest challenge. We live in a world where we are surrounded with a constant stream of contention that tends to forget who really runs the world. The papers and CNN regularly declare what America will do, if Iraq will do whatever it will do, and how Israel will react.

But nowhere in the New York Times does it remember to suggest what G-d is doing.

Incredibly, even today, at the end of the bloodiest century in history, some people still view man as the pinnacle of creation.

Thirty two hundred years ago, we were blessed to rediscover that in the end, our world depends first and foremost on how we choose to view it, and only then, on what we choose to do with it.

We live in a world where so many people are afraid to make choices, or even to accept choices that will, of necessity, limit them. So many of us, afraid to make a serious commitment wait to find that special someone. How many people, afraid to commit to a particular career or a particular way of life, rather choose to wander the world, or the bars, as the case may be, waiting for that perfect relationship, whether with a significant other, a community to settle down in, a career to embrace, or even a way of life or a path of action.

Perhaps this week's portion is here to remind us to take a good look at the world we live in, every day, and to remember that that world is a product of how we choose to see that very same world, every single day.

May we all be privileged to see all of the incredible wonders that are around us all the time, and may we find the strength and the wisdom to know what to do with them.

Shabbat Shalom,

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