

Peninim On The Torah

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Parashat Va'eira

I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you...I shall take you to Me for a People. (6:6,7)

Sforno takes a somewhat novel approach to explaining the four expressions of redemption which the Torah employs to describe the various stages of Yetzias Mitzrayim. The four leshonos shel geulah as interpreted by Sforno are: "h,tmuvu" "I will bring you out," when the plagues begin the slavery will end; "h,kmvu"--"I will save you," when you leave their borders; "h,ktdu"--"I will redeem you," with the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea. After the death of your oppressors, you will no longer be slaves; "h,jeku", "I will take you unto Me as a nation," at Har Sinai with the giving of the Torah.

We must attempt to understand Sforno's words. Although Klal Yisrael was incarcerated in Egypt for hundreds of years, they remained descendants of a noble and dignified lineage. Why did they need to see their master's demise before they could feel a sense of freedom? Should not the many miracles performed by Hashem--for them--have been sufficient cause to establish their personal trust in Him? Would not the idea of leaving the shambles of Egypt (after the makos) be adequate reason to end their insecurity? Why was another step necessary to eradicate their original slave mentality from their minds?

Horav A. Henach Leibowitz, Shlita, derives a significant lesson about human nature from Sforno's words. We are our own worst enemy. Once an individual has made up his mind about himself, it is difficult to change his impressions. A negative self-image can be one of the greatest deterrents to our development. Once one has a low image of himself, either self-imposed or created by others--be it teachers, parents, or friends--it is extremely difficult to transform that picture. Although Bnei Yisrael were liberated from Egypt, they still remained slaves in their own minds. They were not free men; they viewed themselves as free slaves. They were afraid of the image of their cruel oppressors that was etched in their minds. It was necessary for them to see the Egyptian corpses washed up onto shore to convince them that they were finally free men.

Horav Leibowitz posits that this feeling extends to one's spiritual persona. In fact, probably the most common cause of spiritual deterioration is the lack of appreciation for one's own greatness. When the yetzer hora, evil inclination, coerces us to sin, it says, "You can do it. You're just an ordinary guy. You do nothing special. Your sin will not make much of a difference anyway. Leave the Torah study and mitzvah observance to those who are spiritual giants, not to the plain guy like you." Every Jew must recognize his own self-worth and the love that Hashem has for him as an individual--as a Tzelem Elokim. If we would only realize that we are princes, created in the image of Hashem, the idea of sin

would be unfathomable. Our self-image and our sense of pride should deter us from sin.

As we sit at the Seder table on Peasch night, we recall the Exodus and the events leading up to the unique moment of the giving of the Torah. These milestone occasions should elevate our self-image and bring about the realization that we are the children of Hashem. How can a son possibly rebel against such a loving Father? How truly fortunate are we to be endowed with so much. It is simple questions such as these that guide us to appreciate how special we are, imbuing us with a greater understanding of our responsibility to observe mitzvos.

This was Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said: "Take the Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt..." They were the ones who spoke to Pharaoh....this was the Moshe and Aharon. (6:26,27)

Chazal note that in many places in the Torah, Aharon's name precedes that of Moshe. This implies that they were equally great men. We must address the concept of equivalent greatness between Moshe and Aharon. Moshe was unequivocally greater in nevuah, prophecy, as well as in other areas. Moshe was the select human being, the paragon of humanity, who was the unparalleled, quintessential leader of Bnei Yisrael. How could Aharon be viewed as equally great? Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, posits that while, indeed, Aharon did not distinguish himself as much as Moshe, he did maximize his own potential. Hashem assesses one's success in terms of the fulfillment of his total potential. Moshe Rabbeinu was born with an incredible potential--which he achieved. Aharon Ha'kohen, his brother, also maximized his potential--although it was more easily accessible than that of Moshe. In Hashem's eyes, they were equally great.

Horav Yitzchak Goldwasser, Shlita, offers a number of approaches towards understanding Moshe and Aharon's relative equality. At first, he suggests that quite possibly, before Moshe went up on Har Sinai and stayed there for forty days and nights, he had no distinction over Aharon. Second, he contends that there were certain aspects in which Aharon distinguished himself over Moshe. Their equality was that in select areas each one achieved distinction to the exclusion of the other.

In his third explanation, Moshe and Aharon are compared to the two most important organs of the human body--the heart and the brain. Although the brain ostensibly has many more critical functions than the heart, the body cannot exist without the heart. Since the human being must have both the heart and the brain to exist--even though one may be more significant than the other--they nonetheless remain equal. The Torah characterizes Moshe and Aharon as two components of one entity, "And it will be that he (Aharon) will be your mouth and you will be his leader." (Shemos 4:16). Moshe and Aharon were not two distinct individuals who performed a task together. They were a symbiosis of Moshe/Aharon--one individual composed of two components. They were both an intrinsic part of Yetzias Mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt. Each had an integral and equal function to perform.

In his last explanation, Horav Goldwasser takes a somewhat pragmatic approach. Undoubtedly, Moshe was greater than Aharon. Since Aharon was so much above us, however, we have no way of either assessing Aharon's level of distinction or measuring the disparity between Aharon and Moshe. Hence, in comparison to us, Aharon and Moshe were equal, since they are both on so much higher a level than we are.

And I shall harden Pharaoh's heart...And Pharaoh will not listen to you...And I shall take out My legions, My People, the Bnei Yisrael, from the land of Egypt. (7:3,4)

Was it really necessary to harden Pharaoh's heart? Hashem could have simply "convinced" Pharaoh to let us go. That would have been much simpler. The Baalei Musar explain that even had Pharaoh one day released us from bondage, we would still remain indebted to him. After all, he would have

"liberated" us from servitude. Now that Hashem has redeemed us, we have no debt of gratitude to anyone but Hashem. Horav Chaim Friedlander, zl supplements this idea. Had Pharaoh acquiesced to Moshe's demand that Bnei Yisrael be released from Egypt, we might be grateful in some manner to Pharaoh. Hashem wanted Bnei Yisrael not to become subservient to anyone but Him. Consequently, He created a situation where it was obvious that only Hashem -- without any "assistance" -- took us out of Egypt.

The problem of misplaced gratitude is real. All too often we thank everyone else and attribute our success to other sources, neglecting the true source of all good--Hashem. Nothing happens unless Hashem wills it. No man can achieve success unless it is Hashem's decree. All too often we are subjected to events and circumstances that do not seem related. We do not realize that every event that occurs has a distinct connection to the other. One day, however, we will see how it all fits together. In the Talmud Kiddushin 70a, Chazal say that in Olam Ha'bah there will be a history book which was written by Eliyahu Ha'navi and signed by Hashem. Mankind will be given the opportunity to study and understand the purpose of all events and circumstances of men's lives. Our life experiences will all be inscribed there. Every ambiguity will be clarified. All the events which we had thought were purposeless--or even tragic--will take on a new meaning as they are interpreted in light of the continuum of history. We will then become acutely aware that it is Hashem Who really deserves our complete and undivided gratitude.

A Midrash teaches us the significance of directing our gratitude to its true source. Moshe Rabbeinu was forced to run away from Egypt as a result of the action he took against an Egyptian who was striking a Jew. When it became known that Moshe had killed the Egyptian, he was forced to flee the country for fear of his life. He came to the land of Midyan. One day, as Yisro's daughters were being harassed by a band of ruffians, Moshe quickly stepped in and dispersed the would-be attackers. When the girls came home, they told their father, Yisro, that an "Egyptian man" had rescued them. The common explanation is that Moshe was dressed as an Egyptian. Thus, they thought that it was an Egyptian who had intervened on their behalf.

The Midrash interprets the expression in a somewhat different manner by first citing a parable. A man is bitten by a wasp and runs to the river to cool off the stinging bite. Arriving at the river, he sees a child drowning and jumps in to save him. The child tells the man, "If not for you, I would have drowned." The man replies, "If not for the wasp, I would not have been here to save you." When Yisro's daughters thanked Moshe for saving them, he told them, "Do not thank me; thank the Egyptian that I killed. If not for him, I would not be here today."

The message is clear: We thank everyone but the one who set the course of events to occur in such a manner that we would benefit. So who should we thank, the individual who was there or the one Who caused him to be there? If Bnei Yisrael had departed from Egypt with misdirected gratitude, it would have undermined the entire Exodus and distorted its historical and spiritual lessons.

Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared Hashem, chased his servants and livestock into the houses. (9:20)

The Torah seems to distinguish between different types of Egyptians. While the majority were obviously evil and supportive of Pharaoh's diabolical plans to do with the Jews as he pleased, there were those who were "G-d-fearing"; they were "yarei es dvar Hashem," "feared the word of Hashem." Is that really true? Were these Egyptians truly G-d-fearing, or was it a ruse to save themselves and their possessions from ruin? Whatever happened to those animals that were rescued from death because of their owner's "fear of the word of Hashem"? Chazal tell us that the horses that belonged to those

"select" Egyptians were later used to chase the Jews who left Egypt. The Midrash satirizes the G-d-fearing Egyptians. They feared Hashem when the lives of their horses were at stake, but they openly defied Him when the issue was Jewish survival. This blatant hypocrisy has challenged our people throughout history. The same people who have professed religion, love, and fear of G-d have acted with utmost hatred towards the Jews. They have treated us cruelly, brutally inflicting the greatest atrocities upon us, all in the name of religion! We must endeavor to explain the sanctimonious fear of G-d which the religious Egyptians displayed.

In the sphere of morality, Hashem is the source of ethics for three reasons. First and most basic is yira'as ha'onesh, fear of punishment. Man must obediently submit to Hashem's service as a result of his fear of retribution for transgression, as well as his anticipation of reward for being moral and upright. Chazal, however, have always spoken disparagingly of those who do not move beyond this stage by aspiring to a higher level of service to Hashem.

We consider the next two characteristics prerequisites for developing proper motivation towards serving Hashem. They are yira'as ha'romemus, fear of awe--or man's awareness of Hashem's overwhelming greatness--and, ultimately, ahavas Hashem, love of Hashem. Although "awe of Hashem" compels obedience and submission to Him, the Torah demands that we aspire to attain "love of Hashem." These concepts, which arise out of the recognition that Hashem is the source of absolute value, establish the basis and foundation of moral law. The G-d fearing Egyptians were only able to reach the first stage, fear of retribution. Hence, the Torah states that they were "yarei es dvar Hashem." They feared Hashem's word, but they were fearful only of His "word," His actions; they were not actually in fear of "Him." This "fear" was nothing more than cowardice which was quickly transformed when they felt that they were no longer in danger. One must possess all the qualities of fear and love of Hashem in order to maintain the appropriate moral balance.

Hashem spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am Hashem." (6:2)

The opening pasuk of this week's parsha serves as a response to Moshe Rabbeinu's question/demand of Hashem which ended the previous parsha. Moshe asked Hashem why He intensified Klal Yisroel's workload after his arrival in Egypt as Hashem's emissary. It is as if his arrival had made things worse. Hashem said to Moshe, "I am Hashem," which is interpreted to mean that Hashem has a cheshbon, reckoning, for everything that occurs. Pharaoh will receive his punishment in due time. Moshe's arrival in Egypt had a specific purpose - even if Moshe did not understand the implications. In truth, the response did not address the core of the question. The Torah does not give a rationale for what happened. It was as if Hashem told Moshe, "Don't worry, it will be all right."

Chazal pose a similar question to be asked later, in Shemos 33:13, when Moshe asked Hashem "Make Your way known to me." Hashem responded, "And you will see My back, but My face may not be seen." What relationship exists between the question and the answer? Moshe sought an explanation, the reasoning behind His actions. The response was that Moshe could not see Hashem's face. Obviously, there must be a deeper meaning to these questions and to the response they elicited.

Horav Shlomo Yosef Zevin, zl, explains that both these questions address the same idea. The question and answer is primarily the same in both. Man is a visitor on this world for a limited period of time. Consequently, he does not have the opportunity to perceive occurrences in their full context, from beginning to end. He observes events happening; he has questions, because for the most part nothing

seems to be logical in context. The famous question, which nags at everyone, glares at him: Why do the wicked prosper? If man could only see beyond his own limited stay, he would see how everything fits in and all of life's ambiguities would suddenly make sense. This concept can be compared to a person who was born and raised in the wilderness. He has never observed people planting and harvesting crops. One day he notices people taking little seeds of grain and burying them in the ground to become rotten. Not having the faintest idea about the process of planting, he will surely think that these people have lost their minds. Later on, however, when he sees the people harvesting the fully matured crops, he will comprehend what really took place.

Moshe asked Hashem to please show him His ways, to give him the opportunity to understand what is the process for directing the world: How does Divine retribution work? Why do some people suffer more than others? Hashem responded, "You will see My back." Only at the end of time, when Moshe leaves this world unrestricted by physical limitations, will he be able to look back and see the rationale behind every occurrence. The phrase, "My Face, you will not see" is an allusion to taking things at face value, viewing events closely up front without the advantage of looking at the whole picture. Man does not understand the occurrences of his lifetime, because they are all part of a large mosaic.

Moshe Rabbeinu asked Hashem not to send him to Egypt. He was sent, and the work escalated. The persecution became more aggravated. So he asked Hashem, "Why? Why did You make it worse for this nation?" Hashem responded, using the Name Elokim implying middas ha'din, the attribute of strict judgment - "I am Hashem." The Name Hashem, implying rachamim, mercy, and Elokim, implying judgment, are both the same. Judgment and mercy work together. Middas ha'din serves as a preamble for the compassion of middas ha'rachamim.

I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt...and I shall redeem you. (6:6)

It was not enough that Hashem was prepared to take the Jews out of Egypt; it was also necessary for them to want to leave. Perhaps they had become complacent with their way of life, albeit miserable, but it was the only one they knew. Indeed, they might even have wanted to stay in Egypt. They might not have been able to accept a lifestyle so different from their accustomed one. The story is told about Horav Nochum M'Chernobel, who once spent a night at an inn owned by a Jewish couple. It was chatzos, midnight, when Rav Nachum arose from his bed to recite his Tikkun Chatzos, a special prayer recited by tzaddikim, mourning the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash and the ensuing exile. Rav Nachum became so carried away in his expression of grief that his cries awoke the entire household. Immediately, the innkeeper ran over to him and asked, "Why does the Rebbe cry? Perhaps you are not well, or something hurts you?" "No," answered Rav Nachum, "I am fine. I am crying for the churban Bais Hamikdash, the destruction of the Temple." "What are you talking about?" asked the innkeeper, "What Bais Hamikdash? What churban?" "Do you not know," asked Rav Nachum, "that we once had a Bais Hamikdash that was destroyed as a result of our transgressions? Every night I pray to Hashem that He finally send us Moshiach Tzidkeinu who will redeem us from our exile and take us to Eretz Yisrael. Are you ready to move to Eretz Yisrael?" "Wait," said the innkeeper, "I will speak it over with my wife and relay our decision to you."

About an hour passed, and the innkeeper returned with his answer, "We will not go! We cannot leave our cows and sheep, our donkeys and horses, and our chickens. How can we follow 'some' Moshiach and ignore our animals?" Rav Nachum was not provoked by his response. He said to him, "And what will happen if the robbers and thugs that surround us will one day decide to overrun your field and kill all of your animals?" The innkeeper, obviously neither astute nor erudite, went back and asked his wife what to do. She responded with a brilliant answer, one that left him in awe of her. He said, "My wife

tells me that you should gather together the thugs and have them sent to Eretz Yisrael, so that we can remain here with our livestock and chickens."

While this story may be anecdotal, it relays an important lesson. There are people who, as a result of ignorance, complacency, or pure malevolence, are content to remain in exile.

Aharon cast down his staff before Pharaoh...and it became a snake...and they too, the magicians of Egypt, did so with their incantations...and the staff of Aharon swallowed their staffs. (7:10, 11, 12)

Moshe came before Pharaoh and demanded that the Jews be released from slavery, so that they might serve Hashem. Pharaoh responded in the expected manner, questioning who is Hashem who is and what powers He has that would impress him. Moshe asked Aharon to throw his staff down before Pharaoh, and it was transformed into a snake. Pharaoh was not impressed. Indeed, he called out his magicians, who duplicated Aharon's miracle. Egypt was the center of magic and necromancy. Such a feat was child's play for the Egyptians. To prove this point, Pharaoh called out his wife, who transformed a staff into a snake. He then called out a number of Egyptian youngsters, who also performed this magic. Observing all of this, Moshe had Aharon's staff, which had reverted to its original state, swallow up the Egyptian staffs. Upon seeing this, Pharaoh became anxious, saying to himself, "Next his staff will swallow me too!"

Why did Hashem have Moshe use this miracle as his "greeting" to Pharaoh? Certainly, Hashem could have had Moshe perform another miracle, one that would leave a more compelling impression upon Pharaoh. What message was Hashem sending to Pharaoh with this miracle?

Horav Avraham Kilav, Shlita, explains that the Egyptian magicians prided themselves upon their ability to perform magic. The Egyptian sorcerers were by far the most proficient in the world. They delved in all areas of spiritual impurity, seeking to learn as much as they could about black magic and witchcraft. They taught this way of life to their children. They thought that being proficient in this area gave them supremacy over the Jews who were a slave nation, unintellectual, not versed in magic and other areas of sorcery. They felt they were on top of the world.

How could Moshe have the nerve to ask them to release the Jews? Instead, Pharaoh decreed that the Jews work harder by making their own bricks. He called them a lazy nation who had no ability to understand the scope of serving a G-d. Pharaoh derided Moshe, "You want them to leave to serve G-d - I say they should be given more work!" Keep them involved in the physical/mundane dimension. That is where they belong."

This attitude prevailed until Aharon's mateh, staff, swallowed the Egyptian staffs. This miracle indicated to Pharaoh that there was a deeper lesson to be derived from Moshe's miracle. The staff was a piece of wood - simple wood - like the "simple" Jews. When Hashem so wants, however, this piece of wood would swallow up the Egyptian serpents. Nothing can stand in the way of Hashem - not even Pharaoh. If it pleases Hashem, Aharon's staff would also swallow Pharaoh, who is characterized by the Midrash as the tanin ha'gadol, large serpent. Yes, Pharaoh, the miracle of the snake was designed to impress upon you that if Klal Yisrael is not released, you, the large serpent, are next!

Pharaoh saw that there was a relief, and kept making his heart stubborn. He did not heed them. (8:11)

Every time Pharaoh was down and the plagues were getting to him, he ran to Moshe Rabbeinu and implored him to pray to Hashem. The instant he experienced relief, he forgot who Moshe was, he forgot that Hashem could just as well send another devastating plague. He did not care. He experienced relief at that moment. The Midrash claims that this is the way of the wicked. When it hurts, they cry. When circumstances change and life becomes tolerable, they forget about Hashem and immediately

proceed to revert to their old ways. One of the gedolei ha'mussar after citing this Midrash, once commented, "Are we any different? Do we remember Hashem during a time of joy as we do during a period of grief? When the sun shines upon us, when things are going well, do we exclaim, Baruch Hashem that I merited what I did, in the same manner in which we cry out to Him when we are dealt one of life's challenges? Indeed, this Midrash does not apply only to the wicked. Chazal's statement is regrettably a portrayal of our own attitude towards Hashem's gifts. We simply forget to thank Him once life seems to take a turn for the better.

On the Seder night, we are enjoined to say/focus on three things: Pesach, referring to the Korban Pesach, that we slaughtered prior to the liberation; Matzoh, a reference to the speed in which we were redeemed, not allowing our dough to rise; Marror, recounting the suffering and persecution to which we were subjected. The Baal Hagaddah formats these three concepts in the above sequence, with Marror following Matzoh. This is enigmatic. The bitterness that was so much a part of our lives preceded the Matzoh/speed of redemption. Should it not be: Pesach, Marror, Matzoh?

Hamayon Hanitzchi points out that all too often - we reach the "matzoh," we are liberated from bondage, we are freed from persecution; we finally merit the opportunity to experience peace and harmony. But - we, regrettably, quickly forget the past, the suffering, the "Marror" that preceded the "Matzoh." Some of us simply forget, while others block the past out of their minds. We think that it is over, it can never happen again. The Baal Hagaddah would like us to know otherwise. It can happen again! Always remember the "Marror", so that through prayer we will merit that it will not occur again. The tribulations to which man is subject are for the purpose of stimulating him to reach out to the Almighty through prayer. Horav Yechezkel Levinstein, zl, cites the Midrash that says that when Klal Yisrael were in Egypt suffering from the persecution, they turned to Hashem and cried out. He responded to their pleas and took them out of Egypt with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. Hashem wanted to hear their voices one more time. But Klal Yisrael no longer responded. They were saved! Hashem, therefore, sent Pharaoh after them - to provoke their prayer. It is that simple. The purpose of Creation is for man to cling to Hashem. If we do it on our own, we will not need Hashem's "encouragement."

We must thank Hashem for the past and implore Him for the future. The Torah tells us that when Leah gave birth to Yehudah, she said, "This time let me gratefully praise Hashem. Therefore, she called his name Yehudah. Then she stopped giving birth." (Bereishis 29:35) Yehudah's name is derived from the word "hodah", which means to give thanks. The Chozeh M'Lublin asks why Leah stopped having children after she thanked Hashem for having Yehudah? Indeed, this is implied by the pasuk; she gave thanks, and she stopped giving birth! Does this make sense? He answers that Leah only offered gratitude for the past. She thanked Hashem for the gift of a child, but she did not turn to Him for the future. Consequently, Hashem gave her a reason to implore Him for the future.

"We are called Yehudim," says the Chidushei Ha'Rim, "because ingrained and imbued in the Jewish neshamah, soul, is the ability and proclivity to be makir tov, show appreciation, to offer gratitude, for every favor and gift that we receive. We are Yehudim because of our ability to give hodaah." Moreover, just as Leah realized that with Yehudah's birth she had received more than she deserved, so too, do we recognize that whatever beneficence Hashem shines upon us, it is more than we deserve. How important it is for all of us to live up to the standard of Yahadus.

I shall bring you to the land. (6:8)

Of the members of the generation that left Egypt, only two of 600,000 men actually entered Eretz Yisrael. Yehoshua and Calev ben Yefuneh were the only individuals who merited entry to the land. The Meshech Chochmah comments that all of the miracles and wonders that occurred in Egypt prior to the liberation - those on the Yam Suf and those during Klal Yisrael's forty-year sojourn in the wilderness - occurred so that two righteous people could reach the promised goal. Out of 600,000 people, only two attained the goal! The percentage is mind-boggling. Yet, the reality is before us.

There is a profound lesson to be derived. We should not despair when we see that those who adhere to the righteous path that was transmitted to us through the generations are in a great minority. Thousands upon thousands have died throughout the millennia out of a sense of conviction, a superhuman faith in the Almighty, that has transcended human understanding. They were few; they were a select minority; they were individuals who triumphed over adversity and challenge because they knew the truth, and they believed it would prevail. For that minority, for those select few, the light of Hashem that nurtures the seeds of Redemption will shine forth as it did for the two righteous people who entered Eretz Yisrael.

We also see the importance of the individual. Two people were worthy of all the miracles of the Egyptian redemption. The power of a single Jew is incredible, as evident from history. Indeed, the spiritual climate that we enjoy today is the result of the hard work, mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, and determination of a handful of people. The yeshivos and day schools that have educated and inspired thousands over the last sixty years were founded by a "few good men," who pursued their life's goal of establishing Torah chinuch, education, in this country. Is there a greater source of encouragement to those of our generation in which everyone is viewed as a number, not as a person? From the other perspective: If one person can achieve so much, then we will be taken to task for our lack of accomplishment - or, at least, for not trying.

Say to Aharon...stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt...and they shall become blood throughout the land of Egypt. (7:19)

Interestingly, Aharon, not Moshe, was designated to strike the river. Chazal attribute this to the fact that the river had protected Moshe as an infant when Yocheved, his mother, placed him upon it. From a perspective of gratitude, it would have been wrong for Moshe to be the vehicle for inflicting a plague on the river. Moshe would have had to strike the earth that protected him when he buried the Egyptian that he killed. Once again, Aharon initiated this plague. When we note the extent to which the Torah demands gratitude even to an inanimate object, we begin to realize the overriding importance for us to recognize and appreciate the benefits we receive from human beings. We must endeavor to understand the need to teach this lesson specifically in the context of the makos Mitzrayim, Egyptian plagues. Certainly, other areas of the Torah are just as appropriate for teaching this lesson. Furthermore, if it had been so important for Moshe Rabbeinu to personally administer the plagues, why did not Hashem Yisborach command him to initiate the plague without striking the water or the earth? The plague could have begun through Moshe without confronting the issue of ingratitude.

Horav Matisyahu Solomon, Shlita, derives from here a profound and pivotal lesson in emunah, faith, in Hashem. He cites the Chovas Halevavos who emphasizes the significance of unequivocal belief in Hashem, which is developed through one's reflection upon His creation and constant rulership of every aspect of the world. One must recognize the benefits that we receive from the Almighty, expressing constant gratitude to Him for His favors. Our emunah in Hashem must generate a sense of hakoras hatov, appreciation. Moreover, as Horav Solomon notes, hakoras hatov and emunah complement one another. The hakoras hatov we demonstrate to Hashem is consistent with our level of emunah. Our

level of emunah is in consonance with our feelings of gratitude to the Almighty. In other words, gratitude is not simply a fine character trait; it is an integral component of emunah in Hashem Yisborach!

This lesson is derived from the first three plagues: Even the most incredible revelation of Hashem's might and Providence will not have lasting value as long as we do not develop the middah, character trait, of hakoras hatov, expressing gratitude. Only after this middah is integrated into our psyches can the lessons and experiences of hashgachah, Providence, effect us. The purpose of yetzias Mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt, was to bring us closer to Hashem, to be able to serve Him and, ultimately, to receive His Torah. In His infinite wisdom, Hashem prepared the circumstances and initiated the ten plagues, so that Klal Yisrael would have a yediah berurah, clear knowledge, of His existence and supervision over the world. Similarly, He taught us the middah of hakoras hatov, because one complements the other. Moshe did not personally introduce the first three plagues because of the imperative to show appreciation - even to an inanimate object. Implicit in this statement is the realization that one must most certainly show appreciation to the Source of all good - Hashem. The appreciation they were to express to Hashem was to prepare them for the greatest moment - when they would experience the Revelation of Hashem and the Giving of the Torah. Hakoras hatov is a character trait that defines one's mentchlichkeit, humanity. Indeed, our greatest gedolim, Torah giants, were individuals who exemplified this character trait. They endeavored to be certain that they showed their appreciation to anyone from whom they benefited.

The Chofetz Chaim once fainted in the bathhouse. He was alone, unconscious in the bathhouse, when by chance the attendant entered the room. Immediately, the man did everything to revive the Chofetz Chaim. After a little while, he succeeded. One cannot imagine the Chofetz Chaim's gratitude to this simple man who happened to be in the right place at the right time. For the rest of his life, the attendant was an honored guest of the Chofetz Chaim, always standing in the front of the shul by his side. During every festival, the Chofetz Chaim drank "l'chaim" with him, kissing him on the forehead, blessing him that he would attain longevity - even greater than the Chofetz Chaim. This man lived to be over ninety, passing away shortly after the Chofetz Chaim.

Horav Simcha Zissel, zl, m'Kelm paused for a few minutes upon coming home from shul every Friday night - to observe and reflect upon the Shabbos preparations, the beautifully set table, and the delicacies that his wife had prepared for Shabbos. His wife had exerted considerable effort to provide him with an ambiance to enhance the spirituality of Shabbos Kodesh. He wanted to savor this moment, so that his appreciation of her actions would be accordingly appropriate.

For some, it was a lifelong display of gratitude; for others, it was a moment of reflection; for yet others, it was the ability to transcend personal pain and grief long enough to offer a few words of thanks. Soon after Horav Yitzchak Hutner, zl, was told the sad news of his wife's passing, he sought out the chief physician who had attended to her. We can imagine the doctor's state of mind as he was approached by this gadol, moments after he had lost his wife. Horav Hutner, pointing to the kriah, tear in his frock, said, "See, I have just torn kriah and made the blessing of Dayon Ha'Emes, the true Judge, accepting the Almighty's judgement. Yet, I would like to thank you for all you have done for my wife." The doctor stood there dumbfounded. Never had he heard such words emanating from a grieving husband so soon after he had been left bereft of his life's partner.

The river shall swarm with frogs and they shall ascend and come into your palace...and of your people, and into your ovens and into your kneading bowl. (7:28)

The frogs were a hardy bunch. They fulfilled Hashem's command to the fullest, swarming all over

Egypt. Some even "sacrificed" themselves for Hashem's command and entered the burning hot ovens. Miraculously, they did not die. Their mesiras nefesh, self-sacrifice, to fulfill Hashem's Divine decree, protected them from certain death. Indeed, Chazal teach us that Chananya, Mishael and Azaryah entered the fiery cauldron motivated by a kal v'chomer, a priori argument, derived from the Egyptian frogs. They said, "Frogs do not have a mitzvah of Kiddush Hashem, to sanctify Hashem's Name, by offering their lives for Him; yet, there were frogs who entered the burning ovens, even though they could not have gone elsewhere. Certainly Jews, who have this mitzvah, are obligated to enter the fiery cauldron and demonstrate love and uncompromising devotion to Hashem. The Maharsha questions Chazal's argument: After all, frogs do not have a mitzvah of "V'chai bohem," "and you shall live by them." In other words, they may give up their lives - a Jew may not, except under certain circumstances. The tzelem, image, that Nebuchadnezer had placed before them was not really an idol. They did not have to give up their lives. In fact, they probably should not have been willing to give up their lives.

Horav Baruch Mordechai Eizrachi, Shlita, cites Rabbeinu Yona. He says that one who has sinned to the point that there is no hope for him can still obtain forgiveness by being mekadash Shem Shomayim, sanctifying the Name of Heaven. Kiddush Hashem initiates a new bond with the Almighty; it begins a new relationship, a new connection with the Source of all life. The individual is now a new person. The old person is gone, a new person has appeared, who has been created through the vehicle of Kiddush Hashem.

The frogs that entered the ovens, who were prepared for certain death, emerged alive and well. This was not simply a reward for their commitment. It was the effect of Kiddush Hashem. They emerged alive because they were granted new life, not simply spared the old one. Chananya, Mishael, and Azaryah understood that to give up one's life Al Kiddush Hashem is, in effect, the greatest manifestation of "V'chai bohem." To give up one's life for the Almighty is to live; it is to connect with the true Source of life. V'chai bohem and Kiddush Hashem work in consonance with each other. Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah understood this when they were confronted with the challenge of what they should do. If they did not risk their lives, then they were not manifesting mesiras nefesh. If they did give up their lives, then they were not fulfilling "V'chai bohem." They saw that the frogs "lived" as a result of their willingness to give up their lives. They were reborn, their lives rejuvenated, as a direct result of their commitment to Hashem. They ran towards life. They received it. Chananya, Mishael, and Azaryah understood what they were required to do.

Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh chased his servants and his livestock to the houses. (9:20)

Later, when Klal Yisrael left Egypt, Pharaoh acted in typical fashion and decided to chase them to bring them back. Chazal question the source of his horses, since the animals had been killed during the plagues of dever, pestilence, and barad, hail. They explain that these horses were obtained from the "pious" Egyptians who feared Hashem and heeded His word. They kept their animals protected during the hailstorm. They now "offered" their horses to Pharaoh. This prompts Chazal to say, "The best of snakes, crush its head." In other words: Once a snake, always a snake. Even the snake that has achieved the appellation of "yarei Shomayim," G-d fearing, still has innate evil within him. We must endeavor to understand this anomaly. If he fears Heaven, how does he continue to perform his evil? How does he have the gall to go against Hashem? How do we reconcile the characteristics of G-d fearing and evil?

Horav Baruch Mordechai Eizrachi, Shlita, comments that this is to be expected of the snake. This is his true nature. Even if he fears the Almighty, he does not alter his essence - the evil remains. Thus, the best snake, the G-d fearing snake, should be crushed. This is the simple way of looking at our G-d

fearing snake. There is, however, a deeper lesson to be derived. As long as one does not change his essence, he will persist in spewing his venom; he will continue acting as a snake. His "nechoshius," serpentine character, manifests itself, overshadowing his external yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven. True fear of G-d is not superficial; it permeates one's essence, totally transforming his character and personality. He is no longer the same individual as he was before. A "snake" whose yiraas Shomayim is superficial remains a snake, about whom it is declared, "The best of snakes should have his head crushed."

Horav Ezrachi adds that ostensibly, those Egyptians who listened to Moshe were, for all intents and purposes, G-d fearing. Imagine their dilemma when Moshe warned Pharaoh concerning the upcoming plague. Surely Pharaoh scoffed at the warning. The socially acceptable response was to ignore Moshe, to reject his warnings, and to do everything possible to demonstrate disdain for Moshe and his warnings. How much resoluteness and fortitude it must have taken for this handful of G-d fearing Egyptians to withstand the pressures of their leader and peers, to evince almost superhuman strength to defy popular opinion. Yet, they did demonstrate this resolve. They feared G-d; they believed the plague would be destructive, and they did something to protect themselves. Nonetheless, they had no qualms about giving their horses that were spared to Pharaoh, so that he could chase the Jews. Their fear of G-d was superficial. They remained the snakes that they had always been.

Moreover, I have heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael whom Egypt enslaves. (6:5)

A businessman once came to the Chasam Sofer to pour out his heart. Apparently, he was doing poorly in business and needed the blessing of a great man of the Chasam Sofer's stature. The Chasam Sofer looked at the man and said, "V'gam ani shomati," "Moreover, (also) I have heard that your brother is destitute with no source of income, and you have refused to help him." The man looked back at the Chasam Sofer and replied, "But Rebbe, I just finished saying that I am not doing well myself. I have enough to worry about myself." The Chasam Sofer explained, "Hashem said, "I have also heard the groan of Bnei Yisrael." The word "gam," moreover, also, is an inclusive term. It incorporates something or someone else. Hashem was saying, "I am also listening to their groan, to their pain. What does Hashem mean? Is there anyone else who was listening to them? This teaches us that, although every Jew was in an "eis tzarah," period of misfortune and pain, he still thought of his brother's suffering. He suffered, but he thought of his brother! As a result of their empathy for one another, they were liberated from the Egyptian exile. The fact that you are in need does not in any way mitigate your responsibility towards your brother.

I am Hashem. Speak to Pharaoh...everything that I speak to you. (6:29)

Hashem instructed Moshe Rabbeinu to go to Pharaoh and demand that the Jewish People be released from bondage. If Pharaoh would not listen, Hashem would punish him and his nation severely. In order to understand Moshe Rabbeinu's position fully vis a vis Pharaoh, we should consider their dialogue and the ensuing plagues in context. Imagine a family that was compelled to flee their country in response to a tyrannical king. Overnight, they escaped by train with whatever belongings they could gather. In the ensuing excitement and tumult, a small bassinet containing their infant fell off the train. Miraculously, a wealthy man happened by and heard a young baby crying. The wealthy man took pity on the infant and brought him home. Days became weeks, weeks became months and years as the child grew into adulthood in the home of his surrogate father. The wealthy man gave the child everything. He sent him to the finest schools and even found a wife for him. He supported them after their marriage, taking care

of the young couple's every need.

One day the infant, turned young man, rebelled against his surrogate father. He beat him and destroyed his property. He set fire to his storehouses and abused his slaves. He forgot who his benefactor was, all the bounty he had showered upon him. He cared only about himself. This sounds like a shocking story. How could this young man repay his surrogate father in such a debasing manner? Where was his hakoras hatov, sense of appreciation and gratitude? Is this the way that one expresses his appreciation to the individual who saved him from certain death, sustaining and raising him to responsible adulthood? Yet, is this not what happened to Moshe Rabbeinu? He was thrown into the river with the hope that, somehow, he might be saved. Pharaoh's daughter happened by and noticed the infant Moshe. She took him home and raised him in the palace. He was, indeed, Pharaoh's prince. Suddenly, he rebelled against the one who had saved him. He brought terrible plagues, which devastated the people and the land, against Pharaoh and his household. He struck without compassion. A debilitating darkness enveloped the land. The people were struck mercilessly time and time again, until all of the first-born in the land were smitten. This is not all. When Moshe and his people left Egypt, they were chased by Pharaoh and his cohorts. The final payback: they were all drowned in the sea.

Does this story sound familiar? When we look at both cases in their proper perspectives, it would seem that Moshe Rabbeinu was manifesting an extreme lack of hakoras hatov too. Does Hashem not have any other agents to liberate the Jews from Egypt? Is it right to compel Moshe to act in such a disparaging manner, to exhibit such ingratitude to the one who raised him? Indeed, Moshe was to refrain from striking the water and the earth for the first three plagues, since he personally had benefited from these creations. What happened during the rest of the plagues? Did his obligation towards hakoras hatov end prematurely? There were other great men among the Jewish people. Why did Hashem send Moshe, thereby placing his middah, character trait, of hakoras hatov in jeopardy?

In the ethical discourses of Yeshivas Bais Shalom Mordechai, it is explained that Hashem always repays middah k'neged middah, measure for measure. What goes around, comes around. Pharaoh had a short memory. He conveniently forgot that a Jew had preceded Moshe, who had helped him, an ancestor of the current Jews in Egypt. In fact, most of Pharaoh's wealth could be attributed to Yosef's acumen and integrity. Without Yosef, the entire Egyptian people would have perished from hunger. Pharaoh forgot who had interpreted his dreams, who had rightfully attributed his own ability to Hashem, whose humility and veracity never permitted him to take a thing for himself. Pharaoh forgot - Hashem remembered. Pharaoh did not "remember" Yosef, so Hashem sent someone whom Pharaoh would raise in his own palace, who would not remember him. Who was better than Moshe Rabbeinu to teach Pharaoh a lesson in appreciation and gratitude?

David Ha'Melech asserts in Sefer Tehillim 121, "Hashem tzilcha," "Hashem is your shadow." The Baal Shem Tov explains that the Almighty is to us like a shadow. He acts towards us the way we act towards others. Furthermore, the way we act in this world mirrors the way He will act towards us in the Eternal World.

We are always quick to question Hashem: Why me? Why this? What did I do? If we focus on the punishment, we might develop a perspective on what we did. In the Talmud Berachos 5A, Chazal say, "If one sees that painful sufferings visit him, let him examine his conduct. If he examines and finds nothing objectionable, let him attribute it to the neglect of the study of Torah." In his Nefesh Hachaim, Horav Chaim Volozhiner zl, asks, "What do Chazal mean when they say, "He finds nothing objectionable."? Is not "bitul Torah," the neglect of Torah study, something objectionable? Is this sin not sufficient cause for punishment? He explains that the person does not find a sin that is similar in

nature to his punishment. He is not able to equate his punishment with any specific negative action that he has committed. Yet, the study of Torah corresponds to all the mitzvos. One who does not study will not observe. Consequently, for the sin of neglecting the study of Torah, painful sufferings will visit him. One who does not study does not daven, pray, very well. One who does not study does not perform chesed, kindness, in accordance with the Torah's perspective. In fact, he does not carry out any mitzvos properly. He becomes deficient in all areas. One is free to do what he wants in this world. He will, however, ultimately pay for his choices.

The sorcerers said to Pharaoh, "It is the finger of G-d." (8:15)

Pharaoh's magicians were finally stymied. They could not replicate this latest plague. It must be the finger of G-d. To paraphrase Targum Yonasan, "This does not emanate from the powers of Moshe and Aharon." In other words, until this juncture, the magicians were able to duplicate the "miraculous" acts that "seemed" to be the result of Moshe and Aharon's mystical powers. Consequently, they refused to believe that Hashem had sent them, that He was the source of these miracles. Now that they saw that this plague was beyond their magical ability, they conceded that there must be a Divine element involved.

In truth, the magicians already were acutely aware that they were not on a level of expertise with Moshe and Aharon. They could not remove the plagues, only attempt to imitate them. What was it that encouraged them to hold out so long, to deny that they were up against a force superior to theirs, to a Supreme Power which rendered them powerless? Horav Simcha Zissel, zl, M'Kelm attributes this to human nature. If one were to place something sweet and tasty on his tongue and then be notified that this sweet food is poison, we would be hard-pressed to convince him otherwise. Likewise, if someone is under the impression that what he is doing is acceptable, one will have a difficult time impressing him with the truth. The Egyptian magicians wanted to believe and thus, they convinced themselves that their magical ability was greater than that of Moshe and Aharon. Nothing could convince them until the truth glared them in the face. They wanted so badly to undermine Moshe Rabbeinu that they would believe anything that would validate their own line of thinking.

Nachlas Tzvi cites the Ben Ish Chai, who relates the following story in one of his drashos, lectures. The famous city of Vilna was not always a city. The story relates that before it was founded, the ruling prince over the area called together his religious advisors and inquired of them whether he would be successful in building a city in this area. The pagan priests responded with a message from their gods: in order for the city to achieve success, it was necessary that a woman come forth out of her own free will and offer her only son as a sacrifice to be buried alive. He would be the foundation stone of the city. This sacrifice would ensure a successful tenure for the municipality.

The Prince immediately sent messengers throughout his provinces in search of such a woman, whose utter conviction would compel her to do the "right thing," to bring her only son as a sacrifice for the "greater good" of the community. At first, they could not find anyone so devoted or so foolish. After a few days, however, a simple-minded woman, who lived in a small village far away came forward and offered the "services" of her only son, a young boy, only twelve years old.

The prince and his advisors were ecstatic to hear that they would be able to proceed with dedicating the new city, now that their "sacrifice" had been located. They chose a day for the milestone event when the child would be buried alive, and the city would be founded. Everything was prepared. It would be a joyous occasion, a holiday for the entire population. Everyone, from the country's nobility to the common citizen, gathered for this auspicious event and to witness a mother sacrificing her only son.

Just before the predetermined moment, the young boy asked to speak to the prince. His request was

granted, and the boy came over to the prince and said, "My prince, I cannot believe that our god is party to such a terrible endeavor. While you may counter that your religious advisors saw this in a vision, my feeling is that they misunderstood what they saw. I, therefore, ask of you to permit me to ask them three questions. If they answer these questions correctly, I will concede to their wisdom and go to my death quietly and peacefully, for I will know that this is our god's will."

The prince immediately agreed to the young boy's request. The boy thereupon turned to the advisors and asked them, "What is the lightest thing on the earth? What is the sweetest thing in the world? What is the hardest thing of all?" The priests considered the questions. After a serious discussion, they responded unanimously, "The lightest thing is a feather; the sweetest thing is honey; the hardest thing is a stone." As soon as they finished speaking they looked at the assemblage, each with a victorious smile across his face.

The prince then turned to the young boy and asked, "What do you say to their answers?" The boy responded with the sagacity of a scholar, "Your priests do not understand my questions. If they have no clue how to interpret the questions of a young boy, how can they be expected to even fathom what a god tells them? My prince, I am no fool. I would not ask a wise man a question which has an obvious answer. I was looking for the obscure, the answer which only an astute man with a penetrating mind can answer. Even a young child knows that a feather is light, honey is sweet and a stone is hard. By their very nature this is their characteristic. I am looking for the anomaly to the naked eye, which appears heavy, but is really light, seems bitter, but is actually sweet, seems soft, but is in reality very hard.

I will now tell you the answers to my questions. The lightest thing in the world is an only child being carried by his mother. While he may seem heavy, for the mother he is no burden whatsoever. The sweetest thing in the world is a mother's milk to a nursing child. The hardest thing in the world is the heart of a mother who was prepared to sacrifice her only child." The prince and all those assembled were astonished by the young boy's incisive mind. His penetrating wisdom mesmerized all those who had gathered to see him sacrificed. He clearly proved with his perceptive questions that the advice of the prince's advisors was utter nonsense. He demonstrated that a person, regardless of his ability and acumen, will see only what he wants to see. Objectivity can come only to those whose personal integrity is regulated and guided by yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven. Apparently, this was one virtue that Pharaoh's magicians did not possess.

Moshe said, "It is not proper to do so ... behold if we were to slaughter the deity of Egypt in their sight, will they not stone us?" (8:22)

Pharaoh told Moshe to offer their sacrifices in Egypt. Why should they leave for the wilderness? Moshe responded that such a suggestion was untenable. The Egyptians worshipped sheep, the very animal that the Jews sacrificed to Hashem. How could the Jews slaughter the Egyptian god in front of their eyes and not expect a violent reaction from the Egyptians? This is enigmatic. If Pharaoh had issued a decree that permitted the Jews to slaughter sheep in Egypt, then no one would dare to harm a Jew. The king's edict was law. Horav Yaakov Moshe Charlap zl, explains that Moshe did not want to cause the Egyptians to be disconcerted to the point that they would want to stone them. He was sensitive to their feelings.

This teaches us an important lesson regarding middos, character traits. Even if the mitzvah one is about to perform is a great and noble mitzvah, he should not do it in such a manner that it will cause pain unto others - even if this anxiety is self-imposed and perhaps foolish. Of course, if the mitzvah demands that it be carried out in a specific manner, then the mitzvah overrides everything. The Torah

only wants us to be sensitive to another person's feelings, regardless of who he is.

"And Hashem carried out the word of Moshe, and the frogs died - from the houses, from the courtyards, and from the fields." (8:9)

Pharaoh came around quickly. When he saw that his country was being overrun with frogs, he quickly repented, imploring Moshe Rabbeinu to seek relief for him. Moshe prayed to Hashem, and all the frogs died - well, almost all of the frogs died. Chazal teach us that, miraculously, the frogs who had entered the Egyptian ovens did not die. They were rewarded for their mesiras nefesh, dedication to the point of self-sacrifice. As the Commentators explain, they had a choice - either to go into the houses or into the ovens. Some of the frogs manifested such exemplary devotion to Hashem that they went where others shied away from going. They did not fear death if it was in the service of Hashem.

These frogs have presented a lesson for the many individuals who have undertaken it as their life's mission to serve Hashem and disseminate his Torah to the masses under circumstances that were far from appealing. Rabbi Shraga Feivel Mendlowitz, zl, used the frogs as a catchword when rallying his students to go out and "do" for Klal Yisrael. His frequent refrain was, "You have been drafted in a time of crisis. Klal Yisrael is waiting for you." In a time when assimilation and low birthrates prompted predictions that the world Jewish population would decline precipitously, mesiras nefesh was in great demand. The frogs sent to plague Egypt entered the stoves of the Egyptians knowing that they would die. Yet, they went. Many years later, Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah followed their example and entered Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace in order to sanctify Hashem's Name. "From this we learn," Reb Shraga Feivel would declare, "that when Hashem gives us a mission to fulfill, we have no right to consider our personal conflicting interests."

He planted a feeling in his talmidim, students, that they held the spiritual fate of American Jewry in their hands. He instilled in them a sense of obligation to worry about all Jewish boys who did not have the opportunity to attend a yeshivah. When it was time for the students to leave the confines of the bais hamedrash, he pushed them to act on behalf of the klal, community. He fired them with a sense of mission that gave them the fortitude to triumph over the myriad obstacles that they were certain to confront. He would admonish his students concerning their moral obligation to give something back to Klal Yisrael. He would state emphatically, "your first concern should be not what you can get out of a position, but what you can give."

Equally important is the self-confidence he imbued in his students. He would not tolerate negativity. To a student who complained that Reb Shraga Feivel's expectations of him were beyond his capabilities, he responded, "America is an "erezt lo zeruah" (literally, an unsown land i.e.: a desert), a place where the lo, no/or not, is planted everywhere. All one hears is, I am not capable; I cannot do it, We have to strive to change the prevailing negative attitude." Reb Shraga Feivel's students would do anything for their rebbe, because he would do anything for them. The love and devotion that flowed between the rebbe and talmid was legend. They were willing to go through fire for Reb Shraga Feivel - but, then, he would do the same for them. It was this zeal, devotion and courage that catalyzed the Torah education movement that we, their beneficiaries, enjoy today.

"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Say to Aharon, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the land; it shall become lice.'" (8:12)

As was the case in the previous two plagues, Aharon initiated this plague. Since the water had protected

Moshe as an infant when his mother placed him upon it, it would have been inappropriate for him to serve as the vehicle to inflict a plague upon the water. Likewise, since the dust of the land had protected him from discovery when he used it to conceal the Egyptian he had slain, it would have shown ingratitude for Moshe to be the one to inflict the plague upon the earth. We derive from here a profound insight into the middah, character trait, of hakoras hatov, recognizing and showing appreciation and gratitude. One would normally assume that hakoras hatov means that if one person does a favor for someone else, the beneficiary of his favor "owes" him a favor. In this case, however, the ground has no sensitivity, no feelings. It is not a baal bechirah; it does not have the ability to choose between right and wrong, good and bad. When Moshe hid the Egyptian in the sand, it surely was not a favor "granted" by the sand. It had no choice in the matter. Moreover, the ground would not "suffer" were it to be besieged with lice. How, then, does the fact that Moshe did not strike the ground serve as a lesson in hakoras hatov?

Horav Meir Rubman, zl, derives from here that hakoras hatov is defined as a quality within an individual by which he recognizes and appreciates the benefit that he has received from others. It is of no consequence if the "benefactor" is aware of the gift or if he is sensitive to remuneration. His only concern is that he has received a service from someone, and he now owes something to the individual in return. In fact, he wants to repay the debt. It is not related to the benefactor's needs or feelings. The beneficiary is obligated to compensate the individual for the good he has received.

Thus, an individual who is not a makir tov, who does not recognize his obligation to the benefactor, is morally deficient. If we receive, we owe. It has nothing to do with who the benefactor is. Even a domain, inanimate object, must be recognized, because it is the responsibility of the beneficiary.

We may learn hakoras hatov from Hashem, Who, although not in need of our favors, will repay those who have served Him. Indeed, no person leaves this world "owed" by Hashem. He pays His "debt." It might take some time, but every good action, every act of loving kindness which we perform, will be repaid to us by the Almighty. I recently came across a poignant story which demonstrated this idea.

The story took place in 1984, when a woman whom we will call Sarah Goldberg received a call from the administrator of a geriatric summer camp, where she thought her mother was safely ensconced. "Mrs. Goldberg," the administrator said in a quiet voice, "I am sorry to be the conveyer of tragic news, but your mother, Ethel Levine, just sustained a heart attack and died enroute to the hospital. I am very sorry. Please accept my deepest condolences."

The telephone began to slip from her hand as she adjusted to the traumatic news. Her mother had always been full of life, robust and exuberant. It was as if she would outlive everyone. How could she have died so suddenly?

"Mrs. Goldberg, Mrs. Goldberg," came the administrator's faint voice from the phone receiver which now lay on the floor, "are you still there?" he asked.

Sarah retrieved the phone in slow motion. Still in a state of shock, she answered, "Yes, I am here."

"Mrs. Goldberg, I feel terrible to add to your pain, but someone has to come to identify the body."

"I do not think I am up to doing it. I will send a close relative," she responded.

"That will be fine," answered the administrator.

"Once again, please accept our profound sympathy. Your mother was a fine woman. She loved you very much. In fact, she would always speak about you and your lovely children. She would rave about her marvelous daughter."

Sarah was shattered. Her mother was everything to her. Life would never be the same. At the funeral and during the first hours of shivah, seven-day mourning period, her tears flowed unrestrainedly. The shock was just too much for her to absorb so quickly.

A few hours after the funeral, as the family and closest friends sat in the house talking, remembering, crying, the phone rang, and someone handed the receiver to Sarah. A crisp voice asked, "I have a collect call for Sarah Goldberg from Ethel Levine. Will you accept the charges?"

"A collect call from whom?" Sarah asked incredulously. "Ethel Levine," the operator responded. "Is this someone's idea of a sick joke? I just buried her! How could she be calling me?" "Sarah," a beloved and dear voice came over the air waves, "I cannot seem to adjust to my medicine."

It was really her mother. Apparently, there were two Ethel Levines in the summer camp, and the wrong family had been notified. The relative who had been sent to identify the body had been so sickened and anxious by the sight of a dead body that she had given it only a quick, cursory glance and said, "Yes, that is her", before quickly moving away. Since coffins are kept closed during a Jewish funeral and there is no viewing of the body, the real identity was not discovered. They had buried the wrong Ethel Levine.

"Looking back," sighs Sarah Goldberg, "no one can imagine the emotional roller coaster I was on. First, I am shocked to hear my mother is suddenly dead. Then just a day later, I hear she is very much alive and that I had buried the wrong person."

The story, however, is not over. Remember, they had just buried the wrong woman. While Sarah's mother was very much alive, they now had to break the news to the family of the other Ethel Levine. They would offer their condolences and ask that the other family make arrangements to transfer the body out of their mother's burial plot. Unfortunately, the response received was far from positive.

"She is buried already, let her be. We are not interested," was their response. "We are not to go through the pain and hassle of digging her up, buying a plot and giving her another funeral. Once is enough!" was their disgusting answer.

Sarah was shocked by their chutzpah, audacity, and lack of respect for their mother, their total disregard for her honor. After all, how could she permit a stranger to lay in the burial plot designated for her mother? She begged the other woman's children to reconsider. She had rabbis and influential community leaders speak to them, to no avail. They remained intractable. Finally, she threatened them with a court order. This fear did the trick.

"So, are you at least going to give your mother a decent funeral?" Sarah asked the children of the other woman. To her consternation, the children responded that they could care less. They would settle for a simple gravesite service.

"In that case, I am coming," Sarah exclaimed passionately. During the period following the woman's death, she had developed a bond with the deceased and had become fiercely protective of her honor.

She went to the funeral. Except for her, no one else was present beyond the immediate family. They simply did not care. Standing by the new grave, watching the second Ethel Levine being lowered into the ground, Sarah became engulfed in a devastating sorrow for a woman she never knew, but to whom she had become inextricably bound in death.

Returning home after the funeral, Sarah reflected, "I have always wondered why the bizarre mix-up with my mother occurred. When I saw the dismal, wretched funeral that the second Ethel Levine had, I, however, understood G-d's Divine Plan. Ethel Levine must have been a very special woman. At least

once in her lifetime she must have done something extraordinary, because three hundred people attended her funeral -thinking she was my mother. They paid homage to her - a homage she would never have received had the bizarre mix-up not occurred. G-d wanted to repay her good deeds by giving her an honorable funeral, one that she apparently would never have otherwise had. He arranged for the mix up."

What a moving story. The lesson is penetrating. Hashem recognizes, appreciates, remembers and repays every bit of good that one does. Should we not do the same?

"Pharaoh called to Moshe and Aharon and said, 'Go and bring sacrifices to your G-d in the land.' Moshe said, 'It is not proper to do so... for if we slaughter the god of Egypt in front of them (the people's) eyes, will they not stone us?'" (8:21,22)

Pharaoh was afflicted with four plagues which left Egypt in ruins. He finally capitulated and agreed to permit the Jewish People to offer their sacrifices to Hashem. There was one stipulation - they must do it in Egypt. Moshe had a problem with this criterion. To slaughter the Egyptian deity in front of the Egyptian pagans would stir up trouble. Surely the Egyptians would not tolerate having their god slaughtered without resisting. We wonder if Moshe was serious in this remark. Was he actually afraid this might occur? And if he was, was he not slightly embarrassed to say this in front of Pharaoh? After all, the nation had been brought to their knees. There was no fight left in them.

The Chasam Sofer asks this question and explains that indeed, Moshe was not afraid of the Egyptians rising up against them. Moshe meant to say however, that when the Egyptians would observe the slaughtering of their god, they would become so enraged that they would want to kill the Jews. Since they had been devastated by four plagues, they would not be able to harm the Jews. This would make their frustration that much greater - something that Moshe felt was improper. It is not right to cause another person unwarranted emotional pain. True, they deserved the most severe punishment for their cruel treatment of the Jews. This type of torture was unnecessary and inappropriate. Causing someone emotional trauma for no reason is pure cruelty.

Horav Avraham Pam, zl, observes that this thought has much practical significance. He cites one instance in which an individual accepts upon himself a specific chumra, stringency, which others might find unnecessary or even foolish. Yet, in order to demonstrate that he is correct in his observance of this stringency he will go out of his way to perform it in front of those who disapprove of it. It is his way of saying, "I do not care about you, what you think, or what you do." This type of foolish action only leads to resentment and strife.

How important it is to go out of our way to be sensitive to the needs and feelings of others. Moshe Rabbeinu was sensitive to the psychological needs of the pagan Egyptians. Should we not at least care about our fellow Jew?

Horav N. Z. Dessler, Shlita, recently shared with me a penetrating insight along these lines. Yosef HaTzaddik was incarcerated for ten years in an Egyptian prison. He was eventually released because of his ability to interpret Pharaoh's dreams. He established this reputation while in prison, when he correctly interpreted the dreams of the chief wine steward and chief baker. What catalyzed his liberation from prison? The Torah tells us that one day he noticed these men sitting with long faces, seemingly depressed. He asked them what was wrong, and the rest is history. Now let us imagine what would have happened had Yosef been thinking only of himself and had not been sensitive to the feelings of others. If he had not noticed that his two prison mates had long faces, nothing would have happened. Yosef would have remained in prison, and the entire story of Klal Yisrael in Egypt as we know it might not have occurred. History was formed because he cared about another person. That is

the hallmark of a great man.

G-d spoke to Moshe...so Moshe spoke accordingly to Bnei Yisrael; but they did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work...Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them regarding Bnei Yisrael. (7:2,9,12,13)

Rashi explains that Hashem commanded Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon to lead the people gently, to sustain them. We wonder how the events described in the text follow one another. First, Hashem gave an introduction regarding the Bris, Covenant, that He established with the Avos, Patriarchs, promising Eretz Yisrael to their descendants. Moshe related this news to Klal Yisrael, who did not listen to him because of the suffering they had endured under Pharaoh. Why, then, did Hashem command Moshe and Aharon to lead the People gently? What was to be gained from leading them gently, if Pharaoh continued to torture them?

In a homily on Parshas Vaera regarding the erosion of religious commitment as a result of overwhelming torture and suffering, the Piazesner Rebbe, zl, gives the following explanation. He first cites the phrase from Tefillas Shacharis which we recite daily: V'sitneinu l'chein, u'l'chesed u'lerachamim, "Grant us today and every day grace, loving-kindness, and mercy in Your eyes." We first seek grace, because grace is granted without regard to individual merit. V'Noach matzah chein, "Noach found grace/favor in the eyes of Hashem."

Following grace is chesed, loving-kindness, a trait that has no limitations. It extends equally to the undeserving and to the deserving. Last is mercy, which contains an element of judgment. It is extended only to individuals who are deserving of it.

When we supplicate Hashem's favor, we pray in this order. We are quite undeserving. Indeed, because of our tzaros, troubles, we are so preoccupied that we cannot bear examination by a judgmental eye. Even under the most merciful eye, we are deemed so undeserving that we are compelled to entreat Hashem, begging for grace and freely given loving-kindness. All of this is a result of the terrible suffering which is integral to our lives. We, therefore, first pray for chein v'chesed, grace and loving-kindness. Experiencing these middos, attributes, will save us from the agony and suffering which make it impossible for us to attain any level of entitlement. Only then will we have the resources to become deserving of at least a little mercy.

The Rebbe then focused on their current circumstances. "The profound suffering of our current matzav, situation, makes it impossible for us to be osek, busy/involved, with Torah and performing the mitzvos in the proper manner and with the correct kavanah, intention/devotion. Furthermore, even those duties that we are able to carry out are devoid of any living spirit. They are done without good cheer, without joy and enthusiasm, begrudgingly, because we have to - not because we want to."

Moshe came to Klal Yisrael saying that Elokim, the G-d of Judgment, understood the suffering, therefore he would grant them mercy and would, consequently, relieve the originally ordained amount of time they were to be in Egypt. They would not, however, listen. Their shortness of spirit and hard work had gotten to them. They could not cope with mercy. It was necessary to lead them with a more gentle hand. Whenever the Jews earned Hashem's mercy only as a result of suffering, their response was cheerless and devoid of life. Hashem had to change the order from judgment followed by mercy. Due to their suffering, the Jews had to be led gently, with grace and loving-kindness from the onset. One of the many lessons that we learn from this powerful homily is that even to be granted mercy, one

must be worthy.

And they too - the magicians of Egypt - did so with their incantations. (7:11)

Why did Hashem choose miracles and wonders that Pharaoh thought he could replicate? It started with the staff transforming into a serpent; next the river turned into blood; and then the earth became frogs. In each case, Pharaoh's magicians were able to create a similar ruse - sufficient reason for Pharaoh to think that he had little to fear. Why not give him a sign that he would remember, so that he would have no recourse but to listen to Moshe? This goes on throughout Hashem's "dialogue" with Pharaoh. Even when Klal Yisrael left Egypt, Hashem left one idol, Baal Tzafon, standing. Why? Horav Yechezkel Levenstein, zl, explains that this is all by design in order to retain Pharaoh's bechirah, ability to choose, to continue with his free-willed choice of evil. Had every miracle been shown in "black and white," not in "grey," Pharaoh could not have erred. When there is no free-will, the opportunity for reward diminishes.

Alternatively, Horav Nosson Wachtfogel, zl, submits that specifically because they thought they could duplicate the miracles, they were able to understand the profound nature of these signs. The more one knows about a subject, the greater respect he has for he who excels in it.

This can be compared to one who delivers a brilliant Torah exegesis to a child. Certainly, the child, due to his limited knowledge and acumen, will not appreciate the depth and scholarship of the speaker. As the child grows and becomes more astute and knowledgeable himself, he develops a greater appreciation of the dvar Torah and the lecturer, because now he has a "shaichus," relationship, to -- and understanding of -- the matter.

The plagues had to be of such a nature that the Egyptian sorcerers would appreciate their distinction, as well as their own helplessness to replicate these plagues and prevent them from occurring. It was specifically through this manner that the Egyptians would come to believe in Hashem.

Say to Aharon, "Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt. (7:19)

People are always searching for that magic elixir that will grant them everlasting happiness - and they do not succeed in finding it. They go for therapy sessions and take vacations in the most remote and exotic places in the world, yet the secret continues to elude them. Why? Because they are missing a fundamental point, a crucial lesson about life, human nature, and G-d. Without this point, they will never be truly happy. They are missing the attribute of hakoras hatov, gratitude. The concept of gratitude is probably the most important lesson a person should internalize and integrate into his psyche. Having successfully done so, the individual will be guaranteed a happy and meaningful life. When a person learns to thank Hashem for the many blessings of life, when he realizes how many more blessings he really has, he becomes filled with joy at being the beneficiary of so much good.

We refuse to recognize Hashem's benevolence, because we do not want to accept the responsibility of paying gratitude - especially if part of that gratitude means maintaining a commitment to listen to Him and observe His dictates. For some people, saying thank you is a natural response. For others, pulling teeth would be easier. The inability to express gratitude is one of the reasons that there are so many bitter people. One who does not permit himself to express his appreciation will invariably find fault in every kindness that he receives. Such people make terrible mates and tyrannical parents, and they cannot sustain a friendship. They are so into themselves that they cannot see anyone else. They are never happy, because they do not permit themselves to be.

Throughout the Torah, we are taught the significance of hakoras hatov. In this parsha, we see how Hashem did not permit Moshe Rabbeinu to strike the Nile River, an act which would initiate the

plagues and would further work to catalyze the Jews' liberation from Egypt. As an infant, Moshe was saved by the Nile as he lay in a basket floating in the water. He felt gratitude towards the Nile and could not act towards it ungraciously. He also was not allowed to lift his staff to the earth for the plagues of frogs and lice, for a similar reason. The earth protected Moshe when he buried the Egyptian that he had killed. These incidents seem far-fetched as far as gratitude is concerned. Yet, Hashem wanted to train Moshe's subconscious to the fact that one must always repay kindness to anyone, for anything, anytime.

Gratitude takes many forms. For some, it can change their lives; for others, it can save their lives. Let me share with you two such stories. One is about a young man who not only has become observant, but goes out of his way to use his expertise to benefit the Jewish community - all because of hakoras hatov. It occurred a few years ago, when this young man, whom we will refer to as D.G., was living a totally assimilated lifestyle in New York. He had no understanding of Yiddishkeit, something which did not really concern him very much. His life revolved around one thing - music. In fact, at the time the incident took place, he was preparing to leave the States for Paris to pursue his musical studies.

It was a Sunday afternoon, and he was walking down Kings Highway in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn. Suddenly he heard a loud crash, followed by the screech of brakes. He looked up at the source of the noise. There in the street, covered with blood, was an elderly rabbi who had been hit by a car. He rushed over to his side and attempted to speak to him, but there was no response. He stayed with him and held his hand until an ambulance came to administer first aid.

As the rabbi was being lifted onto the stretcher, D.G. noticed that his lips were moving. It appeared that he wanted to say something to him. So he leaned down and bent his ear close to his lips, so that he could hear what he was trying to say. What he heard shocked him, "Sonny, are you Jewish?" the rabbi asked in broken English.

"Yes, Pop," he answered. "I am Jewish."

"Sonny," the rabbi whispered in obvious pain and with great difficulty, "you must go to Jerusalem and study Torah."

When D.G. heard these words, it literally shocked him into reality. Here was this rabbi, suffering from multiple fractures, his body bloodied and bruised. In his intense pain, all he cared about was - that the young man who stood over him would go to Eretz Yisrael to study Torah! The experience transformed D.G. forever. He realized that the man who lay in his arms was no mere man. He was a saint, so committed to his faith that he was able to transcend his suffering and pain just to reach out to another Jew. The rabbi was G-d's messenger, sent to convey His message to D.G: "Come home. This is where you belong. Do not waste your life. Learn Torah."

D.G. listened to the message, and a few days later went to Eretz Yisrael and enrolled in a yeshivah. He has not returned to the States. He remembers only too well to whom he owes his newly-found life - and will never forget.

A second incident demonstrates how hakoras hatov saved a life. M.G. used to work as a newspaper reporter. Everyday, on his way home from work, he would stop by the hospital and visit a number of the sick people and read to them.

One day, he wrote an article exposing someone's fraudulent activities. Their response to his article was to put a contract out on his life. During the following week, one day he arrived home about two o'clock in the morning. A big, tall man appeared from the side of the house and asked, "Are you M.G.?"

The man told him that he had offended a very powerful man who had put out a contract on his life. He explained to M.G. that he was supposed to carry out the contract, but he was able to convince the mob to rescind the order.

Why did he do this? He gave the following story: "While I was in prison, my mother wrote me about a man, a reporter, who would visit her and read to her once a week. I found out that it was you who made my mother feel less lonely. I wanted to meet you. When I found out that there was a contract out against you, I took the contract and made sure that nothing bad would happen to you."

A man performs a simple gesture of chesed, and the beneficiary's son -- one of society's moral outcasts -- repays the kindness in a manner the benefactor never dreamed of. That is chesed and hakoras hatov.

This was the Aharon and Moshe to whom Hashem said, "Take Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt. (6:26)

Did Klal Yisrael need two leaders to liberate them from Egypt? In truth, for the Geulah Hoasidah, the Future Redemption, when we will finally achieve ultimate redemption from the exile that is so much a part of our lives, there will also be two redeemers: Moshiach ben Yosef; and Moshiach ben David. The question remains: Why do we need two redeemers when one could do the job? I once heard a noteworthy reason. We need two redeemers to eradicate the concept of galus, exile, totally from our lives: one redeemer to take us out of galus; and the other redeemer, to take galus out of us!

Regrettably, the same idea that applied to the Jewish People as slaves in Egypt - in regard to the Egyptian culture and way of life - haunts us to this very day. Are we ready to be redeemed? Do we want to be redeemed? It is much easier to take the Jew out of Egypt than to take Egypt out of the Jew. We have become slaves to the society and culture in which we live. Their way of life that prevails in modern society has, for the most part, controlled and reigned over our lives. Its mindset has become our mindset. Its art and culture has so captivated our lives that we have begun to accept what should be foreign to us as being a cultural necessity. Do we really want to be released from galus, or do we simply want galus relaxed?

It was not much different in Egypt. The Jews complained about the backbreaking labor and persecution. Did they want to leave Egypt? The decree of galus was accepted. They just wanted an "easier" galus. It was not Egypt that they wanted to leave; it was the hard work and torture that they could have done without. Have we accepted the state of galus as a way of life, as something with which we can live? Yes. We need two redeemers: one to take us out of galus; and one to remove the galus mentality from our minds.

With this idea in mind, we can better understand a compelling thought from Horav Sholom, zl, m'Belz. He notes that the word p'dus, distinction/redemption, is mentioned three times in Tanach: First, in our Parshah, (8:19), Hashem says, "I will make a p'dus, distinction, between My People and your people;" second, in Sefer Tehillim, 111:9, "He sent p'dus, redemption, to His nation," and last, in Tehillim, 130:7, "For with Hashem's kindness, and with Him is abundant p'dus, redemption." These three promises of redemption correspond with these forms of galus.

The first galus is when the Jew is exiled among gentile nations. Hashem promises to make a distinction between Jew and gentile and redeem Klal Yisrael from their exile. The second exile is more difficult. It is when the Jew is in exile among Jews; when brother imposes his rule over brother; when a Jew is uncomfortable among his own brethren. When Jews disparage and hurt each other verbally, and even physically, we have a bitter galus that is far worse than when the persecution is directed at us by

gentiles. To this form of exile, Hashem responds that He will send p'dus, redemption, to His nation - to His children that are enslaved by members of His own nation.

Last, is the galus to which we originally alluded: the Jew who is in exile within himself, who is subservient to his base nature and physical desires. The Jew who has no control over himself is in a deep exile. He can ascend from the depths of his self-inflicted exile only through his own efforts. It takes courage, strength, faith and incredible siyata diShmaya, Divine assistance. Hashem will grant abundant redemption to he who raises up his hands to Hashem and requests help.

And the frog infestation ascended and covered the land of Egypt. (8:2)

Rashi tells us that the plague of frogs started with only one frog which the Egyptians beat. As they beat the first one, it multiplied and became two frogs. This continued as they beat the frogs. The more they beat them, the more they multiplied. The Steipler Rav, zl, asks a practical question: When they saw the result of their beating the frogs, why did they not stop? He explains that, indeed, rational thinking told them to stop, but they became enraged when they saw the result of their beating the frogs - and they lost control.

Anger does that to a person. When he becomes enraged, he loses control of his faculties. Chazal tell us that anger is like idol-worship. When one becomes angry, he indicates that Hashem does not control the world. Otherwise, why would he get angry? Whatever happened was the result of Hashem's decree. Control yourself! Idol worship abnegates Hashem's dominion; so does rage.

An angry person cannot sustain a relationship because he always places himself at the forefront. An individual may attempt to place the blame on others for a host of reasons, but, after all is said and done, it is he himself who should be blamed. The angry person is insecure, and he takes his diffidence out on those around him in an attempt to conceal his troubled nature. The ones who suffer the most, after the spouse, are the innocent children, who become the punching bags for his feelings of inadequacy.

One must come to grips with his problem and overcome it before it envelops and possesses him. The worst thing one can do is to concede to the problem by ignoring it. Saying it is part of my nature to be angry is self-destructive and irresponsible. Taking hold of this negative character trait and using it for the common good will transform it in a positive way. Anger can be transformed into indignancy when one sees that Torah or its causes are disparaged. In such a case, the negative undergoes a positive metamorphosis and is employed as a tool to combat indifference. So, after all is said and done, anger, like all other character traits, is something negative only when used in a destructive manner.

Only in the river shall they remain. (8:7)

Why did Hashem not make a greater miracle and rid the land and the river of the frogs? Was there some reason that the frogs were left in the river? Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites the Likutei Anshei Shem who compares this to a father who, after disciplining his son with his belt, hangs up the belt on the wall, so that the boy will have a reminder. The belt on the wall will "motivate" him not to do anything that will incur his father's punishment again. Hashem kept frogs around as a constant reminder to the Egyptians of what had occurred and what could easily happen again if they were out of line.

Rav Zilberstein suggests that this is a practical idea to employ to spare an individual from repeating his mistakes. The constant reminder of the consequence of sin can be a powerful deterrent. Furthermore, one should maintain a remembrance of anything that Hashem does for him. If he was spared from a terrible fate, he should have for himself some form of keepsake that will always be a reminder of what could have been.

Remembering and erecting memorials to the past are inherently Jewish actions. While one should not live in the past, one, nonetheless, should never forget it. Zachor, remember, whether it applies to Shabbos, the exodus from Egypt, or various incidents in our history. The Torah wants us to remember and never forget the lessons of the past. In our personal lives, a host of effective rituals are designed to help us to remember our loved ones who have passed on: Kaddish, Yahrzeit; Yizkor; naming our children and grandchildren after those that have died; erecting memorials; and giving charity in their names. Probably the most significant remembrance, however, is following in their righteous paths and not deviating from their legacy.

Following the death of his wife, a non-Jewish statesman took his three children to their mother's grave. The epitaph read: "Caroline Spencer, wife of J. Sterling Spencer, and mother of Joy, Frank and Mark." After reading the simple epitaph, the father turned to his children and said, "If any of you ever does anything that would have caused your mother grief or shame had she been alive, I will chisel your name off that stone." That is remembrance. That is motivation.

And so that My Name may be declared throughout the land. (9:16)

The goal of universal recognition of Hashem's monarchy and ultimate sovereignty over the world requires that all nations recognize Him. The world would hear of the miracles He wrought against the Egyptian land, and a greater awareness of His powers would be realized. The word used for declaring Hashem's Name is sapeir, which means to tell over as a story. Sipur is a story. This would suggest that there are many ways to relate Hashem's greatness, and the medium of a story is equally effective. A story is not only uplifting, it is an instrument of healing. Horav Nachman, zl, m'Breslov, a great proponent of the effectiveness of stories, notes that, prior to delving into the various mitzvos and the ensuing halachos, the Torah first relates the story of Creation and all of Sefer Bereishis. Our people carried their stories with them from exile to exile, giving them hope and inspiration. No enemy could destroy the emotion and faith achieved through an inspiring story. The ravages of exile, persecution or disease could not destroy the inspiration attained through a story. Yes, these stories of faith, Providence and Jewish resilience have kept many from succumbing to the despair and deprivation that have plagued us in galus.

There is a story that goes back a few hundred years that gives meaning to the concept of stories. When the Baal Shem Tov saw a decree threatening the Jewish People, he went into the solitude of the forest, lit a fire and poured out his heart in prayer to Hashem. The decree was averted.

Years later, when his primary talmid, disciple, the Mezritcher Maggid was compelled to advocate the needs of the Jewish People, he would go to the same place in the forest that his revered rebbe had used and said, "Hashem Yisborach, I do not know how to light the fire, but I do know how to pray." Hashem listened to his prayer, and misfortune was avoided.

When his talmid, Horav Moshe Leib Sassover, went into the forest to intercede on behalf of Klal Yisrael, he would say, "Ribbono Shel Olam, I do not know how to light the fire; I do not know how to pray in the manner of my rebbeim that preceded me. One thing I do know, however, I know the place to go. I pray that just being in this holy site will effect salvation." He succeeded in turning the tide, and - again - the Jewish People were saved.

Last, the responsibility fell on the shoulders of his disciple the saintly Rizhiner Rebbe. Sitting in his home, he looked up and spoke to Hashem. "I have not achieved the spiritual plateau of my rebbeim. I neither know how to light the fire, nor do I know how to pray. I do not even know the place in the forest which is propitious for prayer. All I can do is relate the story and hope that this will be sufficient." He succeeded.

The story was all that was left. The analogy for us is that not all people have the ability to convey the message of truth through prayer or other forms of intellectual communication. Likewise, there are those who are not necessarily inclined to derive the message unless it is wrapped in a story. A story, when related properly, can have penetrating insight and touch a person in a way that no other means of communication can.

Whoever among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of Hashem, chased his servants and livestock into the houses. (9:20)

The G-d-fearing Egyptians had the common sense to take their animals inside. Does this indicate yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven? This is the seventh plague to have struck Egypt. Moshe Rabbeinu's track record had been perfect. Whenever he foretold of a plague occurring, it arrived on time with intensity. Only a fool would leave his animals outdoors. In the Zer Zahav by Horav Avraham, zl, m'Teshchinov, the author distinguishes the G-d-fearing Egyptian who, upon hearing of the upcoming plague, immediately took action and brought his animals inside, from his counterpart, who waited until the hail came pounding down, wreaking havoc, before he gathered in his livestock.

Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, derives from here that a yarei Shomayim is not one who merely does not sin, but rather it is a person who is meticulous not to come in contact with anything that might lead him to sin. This may be compared to a person who fears fire. He will make sure not to have anything of a flammable nature in his possession. It goes without saying that he will not put his hands in the fire.

And as for you and your servants, I know that you are not yet fearful of Hashem, Elokim. (9:30)

The Maharshdam, zl, notes that the dual terminology, Hashem Elokim is used only once prior to this instance. In the beginning of Sefer Bereishis, 2:4, "These are the products of the heavens and earth when they were created, in the day that Hashem Elokim, made earth and Heavens." Is there some message to be derived from this exclusion? The Maharshdam explains that the term Hashem denotes rachamim, the Divine attribute of Mercy, while Elokim denotes middas Hadin, the attribute of strict Justice. As Hashem was about to employ His middas Hadin to punish the Egyptians, He preceded it with the attribute of Mercy, demonstrated in the fact that the wheat and spelt were not destroyed. Although the Egyptians were wicked, Hashem had compassion on them. If this is the case, why did Hashem not have any mercy on the Egyptians during the earlier plagues, such as the plague of blood?

Horav Mosuad ben Shimon, Shlita, explains that only concerning the plague of barad, hail, did the Egyptians manifest that they feared Hashem. It was during this plague that the G-d-fearing Egyptians took in their slaves and livestock, indicating that they believed in the plague's imminent occurrence. One who has yiraas Shomayim deserves Hashem's mercy.

And G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am Hashem." (6:2)

Rashi comments that Hashem spoke to Moshe with words of rebuke for speaking harshly, asking, "Why have you harmed this People?" Later in pasuk 9, Rashi explains that Hashem drew a contrast between Moshe and the Patriarchs. He exclaimed, "Woe for those who are lost and are not found! I have good cause to bemoan the deaths of the Patriarchs. Many times I revealed myself to them as Kel Sha-ddai, and they never asked Me, 'What is Your Name?' But you said to Me, 'If they will say to Me, what is His Name, what shall I say to them?'" In other words, Moshe questioned Hashem's actions, while the Avos, Patriarchs, never complained, even when they were confronted with situations that

were incongruous to their faith, such as: Avraham Avinu, when he could not find a suitable place to bury Sarah Imeinu; Yitzchak Avinu, when his servants could not find water to drink; Yaakov Avinu, when he sought a place to pitch his tent, and was not successful until he was compelled to spend a large sum of money. They never questioned Hashem's Name, His manner of interacting with them. Yet, Moshe was concerned with Hashem's treatment of the Jews. He therefore, questioned His name.

The above seems to imply that Moshe Rabbeinu, the quintessential leader of our People - about whom it was said, "There never arose a Navi, prophet, like Moshe," who spoke to Hashem with a clarity of vision - was on a lower plateau than the Avos. Is this possible? Throughout Torah literature, it seems apparent that the spiritual level of Moshe transcended that of everyone else. How are we to understand Rashi?

The Dibros Shlomo, Horav Shlomo Lutzker, zl, cites the Tiferes Shlomo who explains that, as Klal Yisrael's consummate leader, Moshe Rabbeinu, sought ways to rationalize the actions of his flock. As such, he presented their case before Hashem in the most positive manner. Moshe was acutely aware that they were Hashem's chosen People; He was their compassionate Father in Heaven, and, thus, he was concerned with their every need.

With this preface in mind, we understand the background for Moshe's challenging question, "Why have You harmed the People?" When Chazal distinguish between Moshe Rabbeinu and the Avos, it is not a critique. On the contrary, Chazal are lauding Moshe's efforts as leader of Klal Yisrael, his total devotion to the needs of his people. The Avos were confronted with personal issues, personal challenges, personal questions to the faith. They transcended the challenges and triumphed in their conviction. Moshe Rabbeinu was a leader who could not permit his personal commitment to obstruct his sense of leadership. He was a Klal mench. His personal feelings did not play a role in his position as community leader. Klal Yisrael's pain was his pain; their anguish was his anguish, their torment was his torment. Is this not why Hashem chose him to be their leader? His empathy was unprecedented, his compassion unparalleled.

At times, a leader recognizes that he cannot ease the pain or lighten the burden. This does not relieve him from the need to declare his empathy and cry out with emotion on behalf of his flock. This is what Moshe was doing - and Hashem praised him for his actions.

Throughout history, we have been blessed with leadership of this calibre. Horav Kalonymus Kalman Shapira, zl, the Piaszner Rebbe, the Rebbe of the Warsaw Ghetto, was such an individual. His personal grief only catalyzed greater empathy for his flock, who - together with him - were interred in the Warsaw Ghetto as victims of the Nazi master plan. His life was an incredible story of devotion and commitment. Above all, it demonstrated his ability to maintain intellectual stamina, which enabled him to transcend his personal tragedies in order to maintain his guidance over his people, to inspire them with love of Hashem and acceptance of His decrees. I take the opportunity to share some episodes from his war years that lend insight to his personality and leadership.

When the war broke out, the Rebbe was situated in Warsaw. His close chasidim insisted that he leave for a safer location. The Rebbe demurred, replying, "I am not going to desert my chasidim at this difficult time! Wherever my chasidim are - that is where I must be. I will not consent to saving myself, while I abandon my chasidim!"

Shortly before the war, the Rebbe had lost his life's companion, his Rebbetzin. Her death was a great blow to him, and his inner pain was intense. He consoled himself with his only son, Reb Elimelech, who was his trusted assistant. His son stood by his side prior to and during the difficult periods of the war. The Rebbe's love for his son was great. An accomplished scholar and an individual of exemplary

character refinement, Reb Elimelech never departed from his father's side.

The Rebbe's home in Warsaw was the focal point of gathering for the refugees from Piaseczno seeking material and spiritual sustenance. Services for Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur were held in the Rebbe's Bais Hamedrash. Survivors recall the Rebbe's deep concentration in Tefillah, his sweet, poignant voice and his rapture of spirit, which transported him to a realm far above the bombings and the terror that had become daily ritual in Warsaw. Upon gazing at the Rebbe, his chasidim were filled with a measure of comfort.

Yom Kippur night, the bombing began with intensity. Throughout the night, the bombs fell and the fires burned, but the Rebbe's house was spared. Monday morning, the day after Yom Kippur, was a day of exceptional savagery, as destruction and death reigned throughout the city. The German planes flew low, with an arrogance that suited them, dropping all types of bombs and incendiaries. The people who were by then tormented, exhausted, starved and thirsty, thought they would go insane. They had nowhere to turn, nowhere to run. Indeed, thousands lost their sense of judgment and waited indifferently to meet the angel of death.

That day, the Rebbe's house was no longer spared. Shrapnel flew in and struck the Rebbe's son, wounding him in the arm. The blood loss was terrible. The Rebbe and his chasidim had no recourse but to bring Reb Elimelech to a hospital. They carried him through the street under the hail of bombs, which were still exploding. They went from one hospital to the next, but the answer was always the same, "We are filled to capacity." Finally, after several hours of trudging through the streets, they found a hospital that would treat Reb Elimelech's wounds. He was taken in, and he received medical attention.

The Rebbe would not leave the hospital. Exhausted and broken-hearted, he waited throughout the night to hear news of his son's welfare. The Rebbe was not alone. Together with him were his daughter-in-law and his sister-in-law, who had come from Eretz Yisrael before the war to visit. Together with a small group of dedicated chasidim, they waited at the door of the hospital.

They davened and cried the whole night for a refuah sheleimah. It was a long, terrible night of waiting. The situation looked bleak, so the Rebbe, accompanied by a few close chasidim, went to a doctor's house to ask him to come to the hospital. Perhaps he could do something to save his son. While the Rebbe was away, a bomb fell at the entrance of the hospital, killing all of those present.

The Rebbe returned to the hospital and was shattered by the news. One can only imagine his pain and grief in losing his daughter-in-law and sister-in-law. They thought the Rebbe would collapse; yet, he composed himself and recited the pasuk in Iyov 1:21, "Hashem gave and Hashem has taken away," directing that the deceased be taken immediately to the cemetery for a eulogy and burial.

On Wednesday, the city of Warsaw surrendered. Reb Elimelech struggled in agony, burning with fever from an infection that ravaged his body. That evening was the beginning of Succos. The Rebbe erected a small Succah, and the next morning he prepared for Yom Tov as if nothing had occurred. He instructed the Chazzan to sing the special Yom Tov melodies that were a tradition in Piaseczno. As the Sifrei Torah were being removed from the Aron, the Chazzan - in the middle of his favorite melody - broke down in tears. The Rebbe gave a shout, "Nu! Yom Tov!" The congregation attempted to fulfill the Rebbe's request, taking up the melody with as much joy as they could muster. This holiday spirit was kept alive for the first two days of Succos.

Late Friday night, immediately after Kiddush, the Rebbe's son breathed his last breath, and his soul rose up to Heaven. His passing had a devastating effect on the Rebbe. His closest chasidim feared for

his health, but the Rebbe manifest superhuman strength and endurance. He did not utter as much as a sigh over the passing of his son. It was Shabbos, and he refused to mar the sanctity of the day. He conducted his Tish, festive Shabbos table, gave a Torah discourse and sang Zemiros. On Motzoei Shabbos, after nightfall, he broke down in heart-rending weeping for his beloved son. His words that night expressed his essence as a leader: "I am already done in my war. May G-d help the Jewish People to emerge victorious." He never thought of himself, only of his flock.

A few days later, on Simchas Torah, the usual joy and religious fervor of the Rebbe and his chasidim were noticeably subdued. The high point of the evening came when the Rebbe stood before the Aron Kodesh and sang Eishes Chayil. No doubt, he was focusing his thoughts on the Shechinah which was in exile, recognizing Its suffering on behalf of Klal Yisrael. He stood there for about an hour, singing the haunting melody with tears streaming down his cheeks.

A few weeks later, tragedy struck again as the Rebbe's elderly mother died suddenly of a heart attack. The pain resulting from the tragedies that had befallen her family was too much for her to sustain. The Rebbe now was saying Kaddish for five of his closest relatives. Left alone, bereft of his closest family members, the stricken Rebbe continued rallying for his chasidim not to despair. Their morale and spirit were not to waver. His self-control was incredible, conducting his Tishen, studying Torah, and writing his magnum opus, the Eish Kodesh, which was later discovered among the ashes of Warsaw. Everything continued as before, except this time it was all accompanied by tears. The Rebbe spoke words of Torah, strengthening and encouraging, uplifting and giving hope. He sang Zemiros and danced the traditional dances, but it was always accompanied by tears.

In addition to his spiritual leadership, the Rebbe was active in relief activities, organizing a public kitchen in his own home that serviced fifteen -hundred people. His life was his people. His derashos, Torah discourses, were focused on reassuring them that one can function creatively and endure under conditions of great extremity. Perhaps the greatest contribution to his chasidim's welfare was neither the lectures nor the material sustenance; his powerful presence dominated their lives. His greatest lesson to them was his ability to continue, not permitting himself to be crushed by the tragedies of the war.

Entreat Hashem that He remove the frogs from me and my people, and I shall send out the people that they may bring offerings to Hashem. (8:4)

Pharaoh still seems to be under the impression that Klal Yisrael is leaving for a brief, three day seminar in the desert. After all, this is what Moshe Rabbeinu was originally instructed to request of him. We know that this was not the intention. The time had come for the exodus from Egypt to take place. Was the three-day trip simply a ruse, or was it the original plan? In his book, Forever his Students, based on the teachings of Horav Yaakov Weinberg, zl, Rabbi Boruch Leff explains that, indeed, when Hashem said three-days, that is exactly what He meant. When Pharaoh rejected this offer, Hashem rescinded it and was no longer bound by it. Now, when they would leave, it would be forever.

There is still one issue to be resolved: Why did Hashem originally want to take them out for only three-days? Egypt was certainly not a place where the Jewish People would thrive spiritually. It was a country that was morally decadent, the antithesis of everything the Jew stands for and believes in. The quicker they would be released from the clutches of Pharaoh, the better for them.

Rav Weinberg derives an important lesson from here concerning spiritual development: It must be gradual. We often find people that are catalyzed to accept a new way of life, a Torah way of life, only to have the inspiration short-lived. Why is this? What happens? We must accept the fact that everyone has obstacles to overcome as he ascends the spiritual ladder of growth. Some of these challenges are

overwhelming. With due time, patience and perseverance, one is able to triumph over these obstacles, but it is a gradual process. Assuming too much, too fast, is a prescription for failure. While it may seem to work initially, the growth effects will not endure.

Hashem knew that Pharaoh was not going to part with the many Jewish slaves that had become a part of Egyptian culture. Egyptians had slaves, Jewish slaves. Pharaoh would never accede to a demand that he give them up. When the request was for a three day service in the wilderness, however, Pharaoh might have had a positive reaction. This would be a way of imbuing him with the notion that the Jews did not belong to him, and - sooner or later - he would have to give them up completely. Although Pharaoh refused to let them leave even for a short while, it was nonetheless a test that he could have passed.

The idea of a mini-exodus would have also benefited Klal Yisrael. After two hundred and ten years of slavery, exposed to Egyptian decadence and idol worship, they had become acculturated into the system. They had adopted the Egyptian lifestyle. To have them leave it all and divorce themselves from the tumah - spiritual contamination - that was Egypt would have been difficult. One does not abandon such a lifestyle overnight. Their attachment was too strong; their assimilation was too powerful. They had to be convinced by being spoon-fed spiritually. First, it would be for three days and then, eventually, it would be forever. In the end, the year-long saga of the ten plagues served as Klal Yisrael's gradual transition from the spiritual filth that defined Egypt.

The lesson is clear: The ladder to spiritual success is accessible, but it must be scaled slowly, gradually. Put both feet on each rung of the ladder. After one is firmly settled on that rung, one can attempt to go on. We make up our minds to be good, to act appropriately, and the first time we err, we are ready to say goodbye to our grandiose plans. If we would only exhibit a little patience and move more slowly, we would reach the summit and remain there.

Those... who feared the word of Hashem hurried his servants and his livestock into the houses. And those who did not take the word of G-d to heart left his servants and livestock in the field. (9:20,21)

Two distinct groups are described here: those who "feared the word of Hashem"; and their opposite, those who "did not take the word of G-d to heart." Since these two groups are contrasted with one another, we would have expected the contrast between them to be parallel: those who feared Hashem, and those who did not fear Hashem. Why is the second group referred to as "those who did not take the word of Hashem to heart"?

Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl, infers from here an important lesson in the Torah's definition of yiraas Shomayim, fear of Heaven. One who lacks this quality is not necessarily a person who sins blatantly or commits acts of sacrilege. The mere fact that one does not take Hashem's word seriously, that he relates to His commands with apathy or indifference, already qualifies him as a person who does not have yiraas Shomayim. There are many individuals who are observant and committed Jews, yet their conviction is, at best, complacent. They act automatically, and they perform out of habit. Their religious lives are conducted in an apathetic and unemotional manner. The dvar Hashem, "word of G-d," has no relevance to them. It does not penetrate the recesses of their hearts. Such people have no license to call themselves yarei Hashem.

And I appeared to Avraham and to Yitzchak and to Yaakov. (6:3)

Rashi adds, "And I appeared to the Avos, Patriarchs." Ostensibly, Rashi conveys a message with these

words. Do we not know that Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov are the Avos? What is Rashi teaching us? Horav Meir zl m'Premishlan offers a compelling explanation. While Avraham ho'lid, gave birth, to Yitzchak, the Patriarch, Yitzchak did not rely on his exalted status as Avraham's son. He toiled both physically and spiritually to achieve his own individual status. He sought to become an Av, Patriarch, on his own accord - not based upon his father's zechus, merit. Likewise, Yaakov Avinu had an even greater opportunity to rely on his ancestry for distinction. He was raised by Yitzchak, and, until the age of fifteen, he even had the opportunity to learn from his grandfather, Avraham. Yet, he wanted to ascend his own ladder of spirituality. He wanted to achieve his own Av status.

This is what Rashi is telling us: "I appeared to the Avos." Each one earned his own unique status - on his own. Each one became an Av - not merely a son. There is an important lesson to be derived from this concept. Unity, community, friendship: these are all wonderful and glowing terms. They should not, however, be used as an excuse from taking a personal stand, from going forward and establishing our own personal initiative. It seems that we are always relying on the "other one" or waiting until "everybody gets together." The Avos taught us that one must act in his own right and undertake to serve the community personally. Waiting for everybody to get together or to work with a large group is often a justification for complacency. Likewise, one should earn his own distinction, rather than rely on the status of a distinguished pedigree. This is why the Avos, Patriarchs, were called "fathers."

And I shall take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I shall rescue you from their service. (6:6)

The promise of redemption, of one day realizing an end to our tzaros, troubles, has been the source of hope that has maintained our nation during the thousands of years that we have been in exile. In a meaningful thesis on the concept of yesurim, suffering, Horav Yitzchak Zilberstein, Shlita, cites his father-in-law, Horav Yosef Elyashuv, Shlita, who relates in the name of Horav Yehonasan Eibshitz, zl, an important principle concerning yesurim. In the Talmud Berachos 7b, Chazal wonder how David HaMelech, who was being pursued by his son Avshalom, who sought to kill him was able to write Psalm 3 which begins, Mizmor l'Dovid b'varcho mipn'e Avshalom b'no, "A song to David, as he flees from Avshalom, his son." Why does the Psalmist use the word mizmor, a song? He should have said, Kinah l'David, "a lamentation to David." Having one's own son intent on murdering him is not a cause for song.

The Talmud replies that this may be compared to a person who has a debt. Obviously, until he pays off the debt, he is depressed. Once the debt has been satisfied, he is happy once again. Likewise, Hashem informed David HaMelech, "I will raise up evil against you from your house." David was despondent, not knowing who would be the "evil." Would it be a slave or a low, base individual who would not be compassionate towards him? When David saw that it was none other than his own flesh and blood, he was happy. Knowing that a son does not kill his father, he was able to write the Psalm as a mizmor, a song." Rav Yehonasan adds, "While Avshalom may be David's son, and a son does not kill his father, nevertheless this son was intent on killing his father. So, from what did David benefit by being pursued by his son?"

Rav Elyashiv explains that Rav Yehonasan Eibshitz is teaching us an important principle concerning avodas Hashem, serving the Almighty. There are two forms of yesurim, sufferings, that Hashem sends to man. One comes as a form of punishment, which is to purify him in order to atone for his sin. This form of yesurim is given with compassion. It indicates that Hashem still cares about him and wants to help him improve in order to return to his previous spiritual plateau.

Second, is the situation in which man has angered Hashem so much that Hashem flings him away from His Presence. Hashem wants nothing to do with this person. He is now under the domain of the laws of

nature. Whatever happens - happens. Hashem will not intervene. This is similar to a father who is distressed by his son's obnoxious behavior. Having tried one form of discipline after another, the father finally gives up and throws his son out. He no longer cares. The son can now do what he wants. His father will not intervene. The bridge to return is gone.

How does one distinguish between those two forms of yesurim? How does one know if he is still under Hashem's protection? It depends on the nature of the affliction. If it is under the guise of a natural event, an illness that is not uncommon, a disaster that falls under the heading of an accepted, natural occurrence, this is an indication that Hashem has released him. Hashem has handed him over to the realm of nature. If, however, his suffering is unnatural, if his troubles are without precedent, they indicate that Hashem has involved Himself. Hashem cares, and He wants to cleanse him of sin.

This is why David HaMelech "sang." True, he was fleeing his own son. He was in constant danger lest Avshalom capture and kill him. This fear is what gave David so much solace. There is nothing as unnatural as having one's own flesh and blood intent on murdering him. It is bizarre for a son to want to kill his father. This inanity demonstrated to David that this was a Heavenly decree. It demonstrated that Hashem still cared for him. In gratitude, he sang to Hashem. Yes, I am being chased. Yes, my life is in danger. Now, however, I know that my Father in Heaven has not forsaken me.

Hashem spoke to Moshe and Aharon and commanded them to be Bnei Yisrael. (6:13)

What were they commanded to do? In the Talmud Yerushalmi Rosh Hashanah (3:5), Chazal comment that at this point Moshe - was instructed to command Klal Yisrael that once they were liberated and had their own home, they were to free their slaves. A very important mitzvah, no doubt, but was there no other time more suitable to inform them of this mitzvah? Surely, they must have had other actions to prioritize.

Someone who is under intense pressure, or is confronted with a distressful situation can react in either of two ways: he can either be so preoccupied with his own adversity that he has no time or patience for others; or he can identify with the plight of others. He can now feel their pain and understand their deprivation. Quite possibly, this is the underlying reason for informing Klal Yisrael of the mitzvah of shiluach avadim, emancipation of slaves - specifically at a time when they were personally undergoing great travail. This was the time when they could empathize with the slave. They knew his suffering, his humiliation, his need to be free and independent. When we undergo a painful situation, a period of travail, an illness or any difficulty, we should take advantage of the suffering and utilize it to commit ourselves to easing the plight of others in distress.

When Pharaoh speaks to you saying, "Provide a wonder for yourselves," you shall say to Aharon, "Take your staff and cast it down before Pharaoh - it will become a snake." (7:9)

In Hashem's conversation with Moshe and Aharon, He related that when Pharaoh says, "Provide a wonder for yourselves," Aharon should be prepared to throw down his staff. Pharaoh's selection of words is enigmatic. Why did he say, "Provide a wonder for yourselves?" Are they the ones in need of a wonder? It is Pharaoh that needs to be impressed - not Moshe and Aharon. This question is asked by the Rebbe, Horav Elimelech, zl, m'Lizensk. He notes a similar anomaly concerning the navi sheker, false prophet. In Devarim 13:2 the Torah writes, "If there should stand in your midst a prophet or a dreamer of a dream, and he will produce to you a sign or a wonder," the false prophet produces a sign for others, while the Navi emes, true prophet, produces a sign for himself. Why?

Rav Elimelech explains that the false prophet is false, and so that he cannot really produce a true wonder. All he can do is put on a show. He can provide an illusion to fool people into believing that he

has supernatural powers. Everybody is fooled except for one person: the false prophet. He knows the truth. Therefore, when he tenders a sign or wonder, the only ones who are impressed are the ones whom he is attempting to fool. He is not impressed, because he knows the truth: it is all fake.

Conversely, the Navi emes, such as Moshe Rabbeinu, who facilitates the transformation of a wooden staff into a living snake, was just as captivated by this awesome wonder as everyone else. Thus, it says, "Provide for yourselves a wonder."

There is a powerful lesson to be derived from here. The true tzaddik who is petitioned for a blessing will not make empty promises in return. He will promise to supplicate Hashem, to storm the Heavens on behalf of the petitioner, but he cannot promise what is not in his hands to accomplish. Everything is in the hands of the Almighty. We have no idea what His calculations are concerning a given situation. We can only pray and hope. We cannot promise for certain as if we have the power to carry out the promise.

The Smag writes that there is a mitzvah in the Torah that, "You should know in your heart that just as a father will chastise his son, so Hashem, your G-d, chastises you." (Devarim 8:5) We are thereby enjoined to accept Hashem's Divine decree with love, even if it is painful. This decree is the edict of a loving Father who has His reasons for meting out this decree. True, one may and should pray for mercy, but to attempt to "tie the hands of the Almighty" with demands is to attempt to undermine His will.

If so, why are we permitted to pray to Hashem to revoke a negative decree? After all, if it is all for our benefit, we should not mix in and possibly circumvent what is to be beneficial to us. The Baal HaSulam explains that the sole purpose of troubles is to purify us and purge us of anything negative in order to bring us closer to Hashem. This in itself is also the underlying purpose of prayer. Therefore, if our tefillos, prayers, catalyze the necessary transformation within us that is needed to bring us closer to Hashem, there will no longer be any need to have yesurim, painful decrees.

It is related that the Baal Shem Tov once came to visit someone who was ill and he noticed the Malach ha'Maves, Angel of Death, standing near the head of the bed. The Baal Shem Tov looked at the Angel of Death negatively as if he was about to rebuke him, chasing the angel away. At that moment, a decree came forth from Heaven declaring that the Baal Shem has lost his portion in Olam Habah, the World to Come, because he drove away one of Hashem's emissaries during a mission. Upon hearing this Heavenly report, the Baal Shem expressed his joy at now being availed to serve Hashem without reward, simply l'shem Shomayim, for the sake of Heaven. As soon as the Baal Shem said this, he was notified that in response to his selfless devotion to Hashem, his Olam Habah was being returned.

As a form of "amends," the Baal Shem explained his behavior vis-a-vis the Malach Ha'Maves. Apparently, when he went to visit the sick person he was under the impression that his illness had not progressed to the point that he was at death's door. When he saw the Angel of Death, he was taken aback with his presence, only because it now dawned on him that his friend was near death. In no way had he intended to involve himself by interfering with Hashem's decrees. He would never "impose" upon Hashem to rescind a decree. In fact, when Choni Ha'Magel drew a circle and declared that he would not leave the circle until Hashem sent rain, Shimon ben Shetach, who was the Nasi, Prince of Yisrael, said that he was worthy of being excommunicated.

In summation, tzaddikim are certainly granted awesome powers from Hashem. They, however, understand that there is a time and place for these powers to be exercised. They do not impose the rule of tzaddik gozez v'HaKodesh Baruch Hu mekayaim, "a righteous person decrees and Hashem carries out (his decree)," unless they perceive that it is spiritually correct and necessary. They are granted a

sublime gift which they know how and when to use appropriately.

There shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in the wooden and stone vessels. (7:19)

In Sefer Bereishis (15:14), Hashem notified Avraham Avinu, "But also the nation they shall serve, I shall judge." Hashem told him about the exile, and He gave him a timetable for his descendants' eventual release from slavery. He also added that the nation that indentured them would not go unpunished. He would deal with them. The Egyptians sustained ten plagues that devastated them and their country. Clearly, Hashem had a reason for the sequential order of the plagues. Blood was the first plague. Obviously, the first plague was to convey a powerful, defining message concerning the Egyptians' nefarious behavior and treatment of the Jews. It was to serve as an explanation to the Egyptians as to exactly wherein lay their sin and the corruption of their ways. What does the plague of blood teach? How does it set the tone for conveying to the Egyptians that what they believed was appropriate was actually absolute evil, that what they preached was correct was totally wrong?

Horav Moshe Feinstein, zl, explains that the plague of blood focused on the Egyptian mindset, revealing its hypocrisy. The Egyptians slaughtered Jewish infants, so that Pharaoh could bathe in their blood. They drowned Jewish babies, or used them as a supplement to the bricks and mortar for their construction. Can anyone think of a more heinous behavior than the brutal murder of infants? Yet, the Egyptian society did have laws and rules. They had social classes with various laws that addressed social behavior. Certainly, the country had legislation that addressed the needs of its citizenry. These laws were, to the Egyptian mindset, wellsprings of pure life-sustaining water that validated the entire Egyptian lifestyle. Apparently, their behavior vis-?-vis the Jewish slaves was not considered anomalous to their lifestyle. Their evil treatment of the Jews had nothing to do with the personal lifestyle of the Egyptians.

The Egyptians viewed themselves as citizens of a cultured nation with an affinity for the arts and sciences. Their ill treatment of the Jews neither had an effect on, nor was it a reflection of, their culture. So they thought. So they were led to believe. They thought that killing Jews was an intrinsic necessity for the betterment of their country. It did not paint them as evil. The lesson of the first plague was compelling. What the Egyptians had until now thought was pure water was far from pure - and certainly not water. The lifestyle they had adopted was a lifestyle of blood. When they saw blood in the streets, they ran home to the shelter of their private life. There, it was all water, but when they came home, they found blood. This taught them a lesson: one cannot be a partial murderer. You cannot murder in the street and be a fine, decent citizen at home. You cannot gas Jews in the concentration camp and then go home to play ball with your children. It is all murder. It is all blood. Egypt was a country replete with evil. Even what they presented as good was evil, because one is either completely good or completely evil.

An individual once lost his quarter in a pay phone. He felt that the phone company was now indebted to him. A few days later, he came upon a broken pay phone, which "allowed" him to make a free call. He felt he had the right to use the phone since, after all, the phone company "owed" him. He presented his query to the Steipler Rav, zl,: Was he allowed to make one call for free on this phone so that he would "collect" his debt from the phone company?

The Rav cited the Talmud in Berachos 5b which posits that one who steals from a ganav, thief, tastes the flavor of geneivah. In other words, while he cannot be prosecuted for his actions, his psyche has been tainted. Thus, while it was permissible to make that one call, he was nonetheless allowing himself to taste the flavor of stealing and that was unpardonable. His actions would have a devastating negative effect on his spiritual dimension.

Human nature induces us to always find a way to justify our behavior. Who would ever think of conceding error? Therefore, if something bothers us, or we are faced with a challenge that just does not seem to dissipate, we attempt to vindicate whatever action we might undertake legally, even if it is unethical. We can, however, reign over human nature. That is what a Torah life is all about.

Shortly after the Titanic tragedy, two pictures appeared in one of the national newspapers. The first showed the ship with an open gash ripped into its side, helplessly about to sink. The picture bore the following caption beneath it: "The weakness of man, the supremacy of nature."

The second picture portrayed the passengers stepping back to allow the last remaining place on a lifeboat to go to a young woman with a baby in her arms. Beneath this picture was the following caption: "The weakness of nature, the supremacy of man." Human nature does not have to control our lives. Yes, we can triumph over our natural tendencies. Torah gives us the strength and resolution to do what is spiritually and halachically correct. Therefore, we should refuse to accept the way we act until we have successfully expunged the inappropriate behavior or feelings we harbor within ourselves. By justifying it, we only fall prey to nature and allow the supremacy of the human spirit to fall into an abyss.

G-d spoke to Moshe and said to him, "I am Hashem." (6:2)

The Ohr HaChaim Hakadosh notes that the pasuk commences with the word Elokim, which describes Hashem's Name, a name that reflects Hashem's manifestation of His Middah, Attribute, of Din, Strict Justice. It concludes, however, with the name, Hashem, which denotes Middas HaRachamim, the Attribute of Mercy. The Ohr Hachaim explains that Hashem was teaching Moshe Rabbeinu that, despite outward appearances which make the shibud Mitzrayim, Egyptian bondage, appear to be the result of Din, Justice, it was not so. Appearances can be deceiving. In effect, the bondage resulted from Rachamim. How are we to perceive mercy reflected in the terrible slave labor to which the Jewish People were subjected?

Horav Chaim Kamil, zl, cites the commentators who assert that one of the reasons that Hashem subjected the Jews to slavery was so that they would become imbued with a natural tendency towards servitude. Man, by his natural instinct, resists any form of servitude. He throws off any yoke of confinement that is placed over him. The reason is simple: servitude means that the person has no individuality, no distinctiveness, no identity of his own. This is intolerable for a human being. Everyone wants to be in charge, to be his own boss. No one is inclined to be beholden to others. Hashem sought more for the Jewish People. They were to leave Egypt in order to accept Hashem, His Torah, and the yoke of mitzvos willingly over themselves. They were to become ovdei Hashem, servants of the Almighty. This would have been an incredibly traumatic change for a nation that had not previously experienced the taste of obedience and subjugation.

Klal Yisrael obtained this attribute during the years of enslavement in Egypt. Thus, what appeared to be a consequence of Din was actually a corollary of Rachamim, as Hashem prepared the Jewish People for a life of service to the Almighty. Rav Kamil explains that this awareness could only have been comprehended through hisbonenus, penetrating analysis: By cogently asking ourselves, what does Hashem want of me that He is putting me through this ordeal of slavery? Why is He doing this? When a person uses his mind to think clearly, he derives the correct answer.

It happens all of the time. We see and we experience, but it flies over our heads, because we do not

think. Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, noted that while Chazal teach us that the simple maidservant who experienced the splitting of the Red Sea perceived a greater revelation of the Shechinah than the Navi Yechezkel, she, nonetheless, remained a maidservant. She did not transform. It was not a mind-altering experience for her, because she did not think. She was not misbonein.

I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov as Keil Shakkai. (6:3)

Moshe Rabbeinu complained to Hashem that although he had been sent to bring relief to the nation, it seemed that his presence only provoked Pharaoh to make matters worse for them. Hashem was not pleased with Moshe's righteous grievance. He responded by saying that He had revealed Himself to the Avos, Patriarchs, with the Name Shakkai, referring to the manner in which He guides the world. How does the use of the name Shakkai explain to Moshe why life would have to become worse for the Jews before it would become better? Horav Avraham Pam, zl, quoted by Rabbi Sholom Smith in his English rendition of the Ateres Avraham, cites the Midrash that explains that the root of the word Shakkai is dai, enough. It describes Hashem as setting limits to the development of Creation and establishing specific laws of nature. Otherwise, had Hashem not declared Dai! Enough! at the conclusion of the Six Days of Creation, the waters would have expanded and inundated the earth. The heaven and earth would have also continued expanding. Hence, the name Shakkai represents the limits by which the universe, and everything within it, is controlled.

Rav Pam so aptly explains that there is a precise equilibrium in the world. In order for the world to function properly this equilibrium must be maintained. For example, the earth must remain at a certain distance from the sun. Otherwise, it would either be too cold or too hot, and life could not exist. Likewise, this notion applies to the various planets. Everything must remain in its specific place, or there would be a disaster. This same idea applies to a human being, who is actually an *olam katan*, small world, a microcosm of the universe. If any imbalance occurs in his body, in his chemical makeup, he can become deathly ill or emotionally unstable. Shakkai plays a crucial role in the life of a human being.

Hashem was indicating to Moshe that He governs everything in this world and controls it with precise regulations. He controls the world with the *sod hatzimtzum*, the secret of exact limitations. Everything that takes place occurs with an equilibrium that is beyond human rationale. Man cannot comprehend how it was possible for the moment of redemption from Egypt to have been quickly approaching, while the slavery was becoming increasingly more difficult and painful. It could only be understood through the concept of Shakkai, in which Hashem creates a precise equilibrium which fits into the context of overall history. The Divine "computer" takes everything into account. The intensification of slavery essentially brought the redemption closer, because it would ultimately hasten the punishment of the Egyptians once they had completed the measure of sin necessary to catalyze Hashem's retribution.

Many occurrences take place in our lives for which we cannot provide a rationale. Indeed, many are troubling. A believing Jew, however, understands that there are things that he does not understand. We trust that Hashem has His reasons for everything that He does. This realization helps us to weather life's occasional storms.

"So says Hashem, "Through this shall you know that I am Hashem.'" (7:17)

With the above pasuk, we begin to relate the Ten Plagues that neutralized Pharaoh's reluctance to send the Jews from his land. On Pesach night, these Ten Plagues play a central role in the story of yetzias Mitzrayim, the exodus from Egypt. When we think about it, we wonder why Hashem did this. Why was it necessary to plague the Egyptians in order to bring about their agreement to let the Jews leave? Hashem can do anything. He certainly could have "convinced" Pharaoh in another manner to acquiesce

to the liberation of the Jews.

Horav Shabsi Yudelevitz, zl, cites the famous statement made by the Baal Haggadah, "Had not the Holy One, Blessed is He, taken our fathers out from Egypt, then we, our children, and grandchildren would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt." Certainly, the Tanna who authored this work is not suggesting that had Hashem not taken us out, we might still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. Many things have happened since that day. Nations have come and gone. Egypt is no longer the same country it was at that time. What does the Tanna mean?

Had Pharaoh "agreed" of his own free-will and "kindness" of heart to let us go, had he not been broken by the plagues, we would until this very day remain beholden and subservient to him for freeing us from bondage. True, we would have left Egypt, but we would not have truly been free men. Pharaoh would still have remained our master. Therefore, the Ten Plagues were for us. They serve as an eternal testament that we owe nothing to Pharaoh. Hashem freed us from Pharaoh's bondage against Pharaoh's will. The plagues broke the shackles of Egyptian bondage, as Pharaoh was forced to his knees in obedience to Hashem.

The first makah, plague, was dam, blood. The Baal Haggadah refers to the blood as a mofeis, wonder. Mofsim - zeh ha'dam. "Wonders - this refers to blood." Why is this plague in particular called a mofeis? The Ritva explains that blood was the only plague in which the essential character of the subject transformed. Water turning into blood is a wonder. In contrast, in the other plagues, the only alteration of nature that occurred was a change in the behavior of the subject. For instance, a multitude of frogs or lice came together in one place, for one purpose. While this was certainly a miracle, it did not change the essence of the frog or lice. Water, on the other hand, was changed into blood.

Furthermore, the Ritva notes that even the water that remained in the possession of a Jew, which normally would not have turned into blood, became blood once it fell into the hands of an Egyptian. This is a mofeis. Even if a Jew and an Egyptian were to have been drinking with two straws from one cup, the Egyptian would be drinking blood, while the Jew would be drinking water. This is a mofeis.

If you refuse to release my nation. (7:27)

For, if you refuse to send out. (9:2)

"How long will you refuse to be humbled before me?" (10:3)

In his warning to Pharaoh following the plague of hailstones, Moshe Rabbeinu admonished him for his refusal to humble himself before the Almighty. Interestingly, this warning is different from the ones that preceded the previous plagues. In order to explain, let us analyze the plagues. Pharaoh defiantly declared, "Who is Hashem?" In response to his recalcitrance, Hashem sent the Ten Plagues to teach Pharaoh "Who" Hashem was. These plagues were grouped into three sets of three with the tenth plague, the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, serving as the final catalyst for the release of the Jewish People. The first two of each set of plagues were preceded by a warning encouraging Pharaoh to repent and avert the destruction, pain and misery that would result from the plagues. There was no notification prior to the third plague of each set, since this was a punishment for ignoring the first two warnings. The second plague of the first two groups was preceded by the words, "If, you refuse to release them" (Shemos 7:27, 9:2). This occurred prior to the plague of frogs and pestilence. Following the plague of hailstones, however, the warning changed. Now, Moshe declared, "How long will you refuse to be humbled before me?" What is to be derived from this change in the warning?

Horav Mordechai Miller, zl, cites the Rambam in his Iggeres HaMussar who writes: "Pharaoh, king of Egypt, is the embodiment of the yetzer hora, evil-inclination." Why does the Rambam describe Pharaoh as evil incarnate?

Chazal cite a discussion about the question concerning when the yetzer hora becomes active. Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi posits that it occurs at the time the embryo is formed within the mother's womb. Antoninus, the Caesar who was Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi's close friend, asked, "If so, why does the fetus not kick against its mother and bolt out? Obviously, this indicates that the evil-inclination becomes dominant at birth." Rabbi Yehuda HaNasi concurred with his friend's exegesis.

This position, however, seems questionable when taking into consideration the words of Chazal in Niddah 30b, "An unborn child in its mother's womb has a beacon lit over its head with which he can perceive the world from one end to another. No days in a person's existence are more blissful than those days." If the time spent in the womb offers the peak of pleasure, why would the evil-inclination want to enter an existence that is so antithetical to its very essence? The yetzer hora thrives in a negative, miserable situation, not one of bliss and pleasure. Why would it do something so atypical of its "nature"?

Rav Miller explains that, indeed, there is one impingement on the infant's blissful existence: it is confined and restricted. Anyone who is privy to modern society knows that restriction of any form is universally resented and viewed as one of today's worst ills. The desire for freedom, both personal and national, is one of the most basic and intrinsic instincts that drive mankind. As evidenced by the dialogue between Rabbi Yehudah HaNasi and Antoninus, this drive takes effect even under the most blissful circumstance, when a child is ensconced within its mother's womb.

Horav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, zl, remarks that this idea is implied by the name of Pharaoh. An allusion to the meaning of the name Pharaoh is to be found in the pasuk describing the sin of the Golden Calf: "Moshe saw that the nation was paruah, exposed, for Aharon praah, had uncovered them" (Shemos 32:25). Rashi interprets this: Paruah means exposed, for the nation's evil and shame was revealed. Thus, paruah/Pharaoh denotes a breaching of the parameters of the heart, a granting free rein and open license to the evil-inclination. This is Pharaoh. It is to this exposed, unabashed evil-inclination that the Rambam refers when he says that Pharaoh embodies the essence of the evil-inclination. Man's resistance to restriction and confinement lies at the root of all sin. No one wants to be told, - "No!"

In addressing the original question, Rav Miller cites the Malbim who underscores Pharaoh's reaction to the concrete display of Hashem's Omnipotence. He explains that the purpose of the first three plagues was to demonstrate that Ani Hashem, "I am G-d," the existence of Hashem's power. The second set of plagues was to demonstrate the concept of Divine Providence. Hashem is powerful, and He controls every aspect of this universe. Now, Pharaoh was threatened. He felt that he was the undisputed ruler of Egypt. No one else could undermine him, or claim this position. Pharaoh could not deal with this. His identity as supreme ruler was being challenged, restricting the extent of his total control over the freedom of others. The third group of plagues crumbled the last vestige of Pharaoh's imaginary power, for they attested, without any room for doubt, that Hashem was the Supreme Ruler and power. Each step in the process called the Ten Plagues presented further indication to Pharaoh, the individual who challenged any form of personal limitation, that his powers were truly restricted.

During this entire process, Pharaoh refused to acknowledge the fact that he was not in control, that he did not dominate. In the beginning, Pharaoh could still render his own decision, but in the third set of plagues, this, too, was taken from him. He was now completely confused. It was at this point that he was admonished, "How long will you refuse to be humbled before me?" You have already lost everything. Do you not see that you are not what you think you are? Your mind is no longer your own. You have lost your free choice. You have been censured for refusing to acknowledge your limitations and Hashem's Omnipotence.

Pharaoh's defiance, his virulent objection to the limitation of his own power, identified him as evil incarnate. The Ten Plagues taught him how wrong he was.

We quest for freedom. Yet, we do not realize that total freedom is the greatest constraint to one's spiritual development. Restrictions allow the individual to achieve the greatest spiritual heights, as they free him from the encumbrances of egotism and physicality which are so dominant in contemporary society.

In a shmuess, ethical discourse, entitled Paleis maagal raglecha, "Measure out the circle of your activity," Horav Yosef Leib Bloch, zl, explains that the circumference of each person's circle is in proportion to his spiritual standing. The greater one's spiritual position, the smaller is his circle. A lowly, base person needs a larger circle of activity and external interests in order to achieve self-satisfaction. The spiritual void from within compels him to look elsewhere, to turn to outside sources of pleasure and fulfillment. The inner vacuum must be filled and, since the spiritual dimension is not in his area of interest, he must seek artificial sources to supply contentment. Physicality can never satisfy one's spiritual yearnings, so he is forced to seek grander and more glorious external aids to fill the inner abyss.

Meanwhile, the area of his personal circle is increasing, as his yetzer hora pressures him to broaden his "horizons." Conversely, the individual who is spiritually focused, who is a person of great spiritual stature, needs only a small field of external activity to satisfy his inner-self. His true happiness lies in satisfying his spiritual needs and giving satisfaction to Hashem through his service and mitzvah performance. His needs are small; his desires are limited. External substitutes are not needed when one's inner-self is filled with a pulsating life force of spirituality.

Hishallalu b'shem kodsho.
Glorify in His Holy Name.

The Binah LaItim explains that we become glorified by praising Hashem. The Almighty certainly does not need our praise. Rather, we become glorified when we avail ourselves of the opportunity to praise and pay homage to Him. Hisallalu, glorify (yourselves) by praising Hashem. The fact that Hashem is among us, that He is in our midst, is sufficient reason for us to be filled with pride. Everything that we possess is from Hashem. When we internalize this realization, we may take pride in our accomplishments and success, because we are acknowledging their source.

Yismach lev me'vakshei Hashem. "So that the hearts of those who seek Hashem shall be gladdened." The Chafetz Chaim, zl, explains that when one seeks and searches for an item, he does not derive satisfaction until after he has successfully obtained and acquired that object. One who is mevakeish Hashem, seeks Hashem, however, derives great pleasure from the actual search. The process catalyzes great satisfaction for him. This is Hashem's guarantee for the individual who is sincere in his quest.

What does it mean to seek Hashem? Horav Shimon Schwab, zl, explains that those who are looking for meaning in their lives, who are thoroughly disgusted with the type of world in which they live, are called mevakshei Hashem. They seek the Almighty. Our happiness and pride emanates from the fact that we have a relationship with Hashem. This brings us joy, and this is what attracts those who seek Hashem to us. They yearn to feel what we feel. It is our obligation to share that wonderful feeling with them. This is the true meaning of Hisallalu b'shem kodsho. By priding ourselves in living a life in accordance with His Will, we encourage others to do the same.

I shall redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I shall take you to Me for a people and I shall be a G-d to you, and you shall know that I am Hashem, your G-d. (6:6, 7)

The Torah uses four expressions of geulah, redemption, to convey the four progressive stages of redemption. These four expressions form the foundation of the requirement to drink four cups of wine during the Pesach Seder. The first three stages of geulah refer to the Jews becoming free men and leaving the country. The last one, "And I shall take you to Me," seems to be a bit superfluous in context to the redemption. It means that Hashem will give us the Torah, and then we will be His People. It does not seem to add anything intrinsic to the redemption process. Horav Sholom Schwadron, zl, describes to us what we would be like had Hashem not taken us to Him. The word, v'lakachti, is an integral component of the redemption without which we might have physically left Egypt, but Egypt would still be a part of our lives. The expungement of Egypt from the Jewish psyche could only take place once we made a commitment to Hashem, His Torah, and the way of life that a Torah Jew must live.

Rav Sholom relates that when he was a young yeshivah student, he and a group of other students would walk through the market on Friday afternoons to "remind" the storekeepers that Shabbos was rapidly approaching. It was time to close their shops. One barber consistently kvetched, taking his sweet time closing up. Usually, it was already after shekiah, sunset, when he finally locked his shop. He was a nice, sincere individual who either did not care or did not understand. He would shave his customers with a razor, transgressing a serious prohibition. Did he know better? Perhaps. Did he care? Perhaps. Did he listen? No. Yet, when he left his shop, he made a point to kiss the Mezuzah-- no less than three times!

Once, six weeks elapsed, and the barbershop remained closed. No one knew why this had occurred, but, as suddenly as it closed, it re-opened and the barber returned to his shop. Of course, the bachurim, yeshivah students, inquired as to what had taken place. Had he been ill? Had there been a death in the family?

"Yes, I was gravely ill," he replied. "Hashem miraculously saved me from certain death. Let me tell you something. When I lay there on my bed, I made an oath to the Almighty that if He would allow me to live, I would travel to Meron, to the gravesite of Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai, and I would shave off my beard there" - with a razor, no less! Rav Sholom continues, "This is the attitude of one who does not comprehend the meaning of v'lokachti eschem li l'am. Without Torah, he has no perception concerning right and wrong. The individual who does not have Torah has not really been liberated from Egypt. The influence of that g-dless society continues to pervade his psyche."

Chazal teach us that the shifchah al ha'yam, simple maidservant at the Red Sea, was privy to a much greater revelation of Hashem than even the Navi Yechezkel. Yet, as Horav Chaim Shmuelevitz, zl, was wont to add, "But she nevertheless remained a shifchah!" Despite observing so much, perceiving Hashem on an unprecedented level of clarity, she did not change into a more spiritually correct human being. She remained a maidservant. Why? One would think that such a revelation would transform a person forever.

Rav Sholom explains that without the Torah's powerful impact on our lives, all of the miracles and spiritual revelations to which we might be exposed would not leave a lasting impression. Yes, one can experience Hashem's manifestation during the splitting of the Red Sea and still remain a maidservant. The essential ingredient required to distill and preserve this remarkable event is Torah. Without it, one cannot interpret the events of his own life.

Chazal tell us that one may drink wine between the four Kossos, cups, that are a part of the Pesach

Seder ritual. This applies between the first, second and third cups. Between the third and fourth cup, however, one may not drink. The Talmud Yerushalmi explains that if one drinks between the first and second cup, or the second and third cup, he will not become inebriated, because he will eat shortly thereafter, and the food will absorb the alcoholic effects of the wine. Participants of a seder drink the third cup, however, after the meal. Since the individual will no longer be eating, it is possible that, if he drinks more wine, he will not remain in control of his faculties.

Rav Sholom explains this homiletically. The four cups of wine are symbolic of the Egyptian liberation. Hashem redeemed us from the Egyptian center of immorality and perversion, from the slavery and continual persecution. He did so with wondrous miracles and an incredible revelation of his power and strength. The experience of liberation, with its ensuing supernatural events, can go to a person's head. Indeed, he might become "drunk" with the experience. One might become so out of control that he might speculate, "I have made it! I am there! I have been liberated from Egypt. I am walking with Moshe and Aharon, surrounded by the Pillars of Cloud: The Manna is delivered to my home everyday! What more is there?"

Hashem responds: "Do not become drunk. You are not there yet. The ultimate, complete geulah, redemption, is still before you. V'lokachti eschem li l'am, 'I will take you to Me for a nation.'" That is the conclusion of redemption. That is the fourth cup. Until one reaches the finish line, the redemption has not fully taken place. Only after the purpose of redemption has occurred, after Klal Yisrael has received the Torah, is he truly free. Without the Torah, Egypt is still within him. Freedom comes when one connects with Hashem, which can only be experienced through committing himself to His Torah.

But they did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work. (6:9)

In the previous parsha (Shemos 4: 29-31), we find that when Moshe Rabbeinu and Aharon HaKohen had originally presented their case for freedom to the Jewish People, their response was positive: "Aharon spoke all the words that Hashem had spoken to Moshe; and he performed the signs in sight of the people. And the people believed, and they heard that Hashem had remembered Bnei Yisrael and that He saw their affliction." Yet, here when Moshe approached them again, their reaction was negative - almost no reaction. What was the difference? Moshe was essentially saying the same thing.

Horav Sholom Yosef Elyashiv, Shlita, explains that before Moshe's second encounter, he presented the consequences of their liberation. "I am Hashem: and I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; and I shall rescue you from their service; I shall redeem you, I shall take you to Me for a People and I shall be a G-d to you" (Ibid 6:6,7) The promise of redemption was lined with a demand, a responsibility that would be imposed on them. Hashem would become their G-d, and they would be His People. They would accept the Torah and become His Nation - not just any nation - but a mamleches Kohanim v'goi kadosh, a kingdom of Priests and a holy nation. When they heard the demands that would be placed upon them, they no longer wanted to listen. Why? Because they were depressed by the hard work to which they had been subjected. They could not think rationally.

Rav Elyashiv derives from here an important principle in Jewish human nature. When a Jew does not listen, there is an explanation for it. A Jew does not just ignore someone who speaks to him about the positive aspects of observance and serving Hashem. A specific reason, an impediment, prevents him from listening properly. In this case, it was kotzer ruach, shortness of breath, and avodah kashah, hard work. Depression, dejection, indifference, low self-esteem, hopelessness: these are just some of the possibilities that come to mind. One who has fallen prey to these maladies will not listen. He has no interest in listening. Only an astute, caring and loving teacher realizes that a Jew who does not listen has a reason.

Stress comes in many shapes and forms. For some it is parnassah, earning a livelihood; for others, it is a low self-esteem resulting from various sources. After all is said and done, people are confronted with issues, both legitimate and imagined. These issues are sufficient cause to impede one's ability to "hear" properly. We are living in a period during which the spiritual climate is very intense. Baruch Hashem, Klal Yisrael is rebuilding. The Jewish outreach movement is moving ahead at full throttle. Yet, we find many disenchanted young people who, despite having been raised in observant and even yeshivish homes, have absolutely no interest in frumkeit. They are indifferent, almost apathetic, to anything frum. Why?

V'lo shamu el Moshe, mi'kotzer ruach u'mei'avodah kashah. Some of us just do not thrive under the same pressure that others seem to find riveting and stimulating. Children who grow up in a home where their parents present the paradox of hypocrisy by playing the Orthodox role, while ignoring many of the simple ethics expounded by our Chazal in Pirkei Avos, are distressed about what they see. Instead of viewing the latest chumros, stringencies in Halachah, as an indication of Klal Yisrael's spiritual fortitude and exceptional growth, they see them as bogging them down and restricting them even more. They perceive the prohibitive mitzvos as the defining factor of Yiddishkeit - negativity and "do nots." In addition, certain disputes and machlokes "l'shem Shomayim" have crept into the Orthodox camp, with all of the "newly- found, permissible" ways to slander and undermine Yiddishkeit. All of this leads to kotzer ruach. It destroys a young person's self-esteem, because it enables him to question authority and view his heritage from a negative perspective. This is compounded when he is greeted in shul or at home with cynicism or outright hatred - greetings that only stoke his depression even more.

Rav Elyashiv teaches us that when a Jew does not listen, he has an explanation. Perhaps, instead of laying blame, we should take the time to search for that reason. It might make a world of difference. The Klausenberger Rebbe, zl, was known for his boundless love for each and every Jew. After the war, when depression was, sadly, a way of life, he nurtured and held the hand of many a brokenhearted Jew, bringing them back to spiritual life. One incident that was recorded in these pages a number of years ago is worth repeating for its timeless message.

The emotional and mental condition of the newly-liberated survivors was, at best, fragile. They were broken and shattered in body and soul. During the war, they concealed their bottled-up emotions. After liberation, they were forced to confront these feelings, considering the destruction and personal loss that each one had sustained. Adding to their tragedy was the knowledge that the world had, for the most part, stood idly by, indifferent to their pain and persecution. The spiritual crisis that resulted from these factors affected virtually every survivor. It was precisely during this time of darkness and depression that the light of the Klausenberger Rebbe shone brightly, illuminating the path back to spirituality and emotional health. He was one of them, who suffered like they did, but remained unbroken in spirit, resolute in his commitment to rebuild and reclaim the spiritual legacy of the Jewish nation.

Many stories occurred connected with him. One incident particularly comes to mind, which I feel is indicative of the underlying idea expressed in this thesis. After the war, the Rebbe turned his attention to convincing the surviving Jews to follow him to the Displaced Persons camp which served as the center for the Jews who had survived the war. Many went because here they would receive food and support from the Americans. The Rebbe made every attempt to persuade these Jews to return body and soul to the Jewish People. Some said openly that they had no desire to live as Jews. The Rebbe was patient. He did not badger; he listened with love, interjecting with a word here and there. Many were moved by the way he listened to them, and they came back.

There was a young man who had lost everything, having experienced the cruelty of watching his wife

and children die before his eyes. He really had no desire to continue living. Every day that went by, he persevered and pushed himself to the next day. Religious observance, however, was the furthest thing from his mind. One day, as this young man was walking through the camp, he noticed the Rebbe walking with a group of students. He tried to turn away, but it was too late; the Rebbe had already noticed him.

Motioning him aside, the Rebbe asked to speak with him - alone. At first, the young man demurred, claiming that he was busy. He really had no interest in speaking with the Rebbe about frumkeit. He was not buying what the Rebbe was selling. Nonetheless, the Rebbe was a difficult person to refuse, so he relented, and they walked off to a side. "My child," the Rebbe began, "I know why you do not want to talk. You are upset after having gone through so much. Your personal losses are staggering. I know. I lost my wife and ten children." Suddenly, the Rebbe began to cry - and cry. Observing this, the young man finally allowed himself to release the pent-up pressures that had been driving him insane. The two just stood there, arms embracing each other, weeping uncontrollably on one another's shoulder.

A few minutes went by, and the Rebbe composed himself. He looked into the eyes of the young man, who no longer seemed so bitter and said, "I do not blame you for the way you feel, but I ask you to remember one thing - who you are! Always remember to be yourself." With these words, the Rebbe ignited a spark that continues to burn to this very day, as the young man, now a grandfather many times over, reflects on the carefully worded message of the Rebbe, and how it saved his spiritual life.

The Rebbe understood that the bitterness that had been bottled up within this young man prevented him from listening. He told him something that we should all remember. "Be yourself." All too often, parents expect their children to be someone else, someone they are not. Let them be who they are, and you will see the nachas you deserve.

For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart. (9:14)

The ten makos, plagues, that struck Egypt took their toll on the populace. Each one touched a specific nerve. Makas barad, the plague of hail, however, seems to have had a compelling effect on Pharaoh, more so than the other plagues. Indeed, the Torah emphasizes this with Moshe Rabbeinu's introduction of the plague. "For this time I shall send all My plagues against your heart." Why is barad considered "all My plagues"? It was only one of ten. Furthermore, the reaction to the hail was also exceptional. The Egyptian who prepared himself and his animals for this plague is referred to as "G-d-fearing." This is the overwhelming effect that the hail had on them.

The Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that barad is referred to as kol mageifosai, "all My plagues," because through the barad, the Egyptians came to realize that all the plagues originated from Hashem. Until that point, Pharaoh had tried to convince himself that the power of magic or some other form of mysticism had been empowering Moshe to effect the plagues. Barad taught Pharaoh that this was no simple act of magic. This was the real thing. Now Pharaoh realized that he was dealing with a super power, a Supreme Being. No longer did he think that the previous plagues were the work of some mystic. They were also authentic. What traits of the plague of hail engendered such a reaction from Pharaoh?

Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the uniqueness of barad lies in the fact that neither the hail nor the fire had any effect on the other: the hail did not weaken the heat of the fire; the fire did not melt the hail. In other words, the hail was comprised of ice and fire synthesized together, each retaining its unique properties without having any adverse effect on the other. This is similar to a king who was served by two dukes who were sworn enemies of each other. When the king went to war and needed the services of both of his dukes, they made peace with each other in order to serve their master, the king.

Witchcraft/sorcery is a spiritual entity that functions within the sphere of creation, receiving its power from the forces of tumah, spiritual contamination. Egypt was the center of witchcraft. Indeed, the Christian godhead studied witchcraft there. Any product of the forces of tumah, which is in its own right disjointed from the source of holiness, cannot by its very nature ever unite with anything else. Blood, frogs, lice, pestilence, and boils are all natural creations which carry out Hashem's command. The forces of impurity have the ability to create such natural entities. This is why Pharaoh was unimpressed by the first six plagues. It was only with the advent of the seventh plague that he became nervous. This plague had two opposing creations working together. This was impossible in Pharaoh's world of spiritual impurity. This could not have been the result of the forces of evil. It had to be the work of the Creator - as similarly evidenced by the previous plagues. To put it simply, it is highly unlikely that peace can be affected between two warring dukes unless they are both subservient to one king. Thus, if there is such a king that rules over opposing factions, then he must be the Supreme Ruler over the entire world. This idea frightened Pharaoh, because he now knew that he had met his match.

Alternatively, I recently heard an insight concerning another aspect of makas barad that left an indelible impression on Pharaoh. In the natural order of events, the nation that triumphs in war does not act with compassion to the defeated nation. On the contrary, it collects its spoils and usually leaves the loser with nothing more than bitter memories of its defeat. Here we find Moshe instructing Pharaoh to "send, gather in your livestock and everything you have in the field" (ibid 9:19). When the victor demonstrates his nobility by showing sensitivity to the vanquished, it indicates that we are dealing with a different sort of conqueror. In fact, 'champion' would be a better word to describe this individual. In any event, Pharaoh was stunned to the point that he proclaimed, Hashem ha'tzaddik, "Hashem is the Righteous One" (ibid 9:27), something he was not accustomed to saying.

The seventh plague created a mahapeichah, metamorphosis, within the Egyptian psyche and culture. Into their world of cold, desolate darkness, malevolence and bigotry a tiny ray of light crept. Regrettably, it was too late.