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Bridging the Generation Gap

Excerpt from ***Seasons of Nobility: Sermons on the Festivals***
by Rabbi Aaron Levine

April 14, 1984

According to Tradition, Elijah visits the Jewish home on two occasions: one, at every *brit milah*,[1] and also during the Seder.[2] It is Elijah who will bridge the generation gap. "He will turn back [to God] the hearts of fathers with their sons and the hearts of sons with their fathers" (Malachi 3:24).

Now, Elijah seems like an unlikely intimate guest, as he is a zealot.[3] Would not Aaron, who is a lover and pursuer of peace,[4] be a much more appropriate guest? Moreover, it appears that Elijah to some extent failed in his mission. The high point of his career occurred on Mount

1. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 29; Zohar, *Lekh Lekha* 1:93a.
2. It is customary to place a cup of wine on the Seder table for Elijah the Prophet. See R. Jacob b. Joseph Reischer (Prague, ca. 1670–1733), *Ḥok Yaakov*, end of *siman* 480; R. Hayyim b. Israel Benveniste (*Ba'al Knesset ha-Gedolah*, Smyrna, 1603–1673), *Pesaḥ Me'uvin*, ¶ 182; R. Moses Hagiz (*Maharam Ḥagiz*, 1672–ca. 1751), *She'elot u-Teshuvot Shetei ha-Leḥem*; R. Hayyim Palaggi (Smyrna, 1788–1869), *Mo'ed le-Khol Ḥai* 4:30.
3. I Kings 19:10.
4. Mishnah, *Avot* 1:12.

Carmel. There, he offered a contrast between himself on the one hand and the 450 prophets of the Baal on the other hand. Twin bulls were selected. The prophets of the Baal could not manage to cause a fire to descend to consume their bull. "There was neither sound nor response" (I Kings 18:26). Elijah ordered that a trench be built on his altar, filled with water. Then he prayed, "Answer me, Hashem, answer me" (I Kings 18:37). It was at this point that Elijah reached the zenith of his career, when all the people pronounced, "Hashem, He is the God! Hashem, He is the God!" (I Kings 18:39).

Now, was this a permanent victory? Did it provoke mass conversions? No! Immediately after this, Jezebel tells Elijah that she will kill him as she did the 450 prophets of the Baal.[5] Elijah flees and barely escapes with his life. He finally gets to the cave in Mount Carmel, and then Hashem asks him, "Why are you here, Elijah?" (I Kings 19:9). Was he not shocked at this question? He answers, "I have acted with great zeal for Hashem, God of Legions, for the Children of Israel have forsaken Your covenant" (I Kings 19:10). At this point, Elijah is assigned to appear at every *brit milah* and report on the merit of the Jewish people.[6]

To summarize Elijah's approach, he was very sensitive to evil and disillusioned with sinners. To counteract this, he wanted to do nothing less than recreate the Exodus from Egypt and the Splitting of the Sea of Reeds, that is, completely change the natural order, and create an aura of certitude. The way to deal with evil is with open confrontation.

Elijah needs to be re-educated regarding all these points. With respect to the disillusionment, the *brit milah* testifies to the Jewish people's commitment to Hashem.

With respect to our certitude, we have the Wise Son's question, "What are the testimonies, and the decrees, and the ordinances that Hashem, our God, commanded you [*etkhem*]?" (Deuteronomy 6:20). This is a general question, asking for the categorization of mitzvot. But the author of the Haggadah applies it to the *korban pesaḥ*. The Wise Son is a tough guy who seeks a profound understanding of the mitzvot. First he wants to understand how the mitzvah is a testimony regarding the

5. I Kings 19:2.
6. *Pirkei de-Rabbi Eliezer* 29; Zohar, *Lekh Lekha* 1:93a.

bond between Hashem and the Jewish people. The Wise Son is therefore interested in not just the mechanical performance of the mitzvot but also their symbolic meaning. Then he is interested in finding out what he does not know. The *korban pesaḥ* is called a *ḥok*, but certainly it is understood. The Children of Israel aimed to nullify the *avodah zarah* of the Egyptians.[7]

But the Wise Son wants to find an element that he does not understand in the *pesaḥ*. He wants to find *mishpat* in the *pesaḥ* as well. This is how a *mitzvah bein adam la-Makom* relates to *bein adam le-ḥavero*. The Wise Son understands that the Torah is interpreted as a whole.

These are very tough demands on the teacher. In fact, if the teacher himself is an *eino yode'a lish'ol*, that is, he is incapable of asking the right questions, he might regard the Wise Son as the Wicked Son. After all, he could easily seize upon the word "*etkhem*," "you" (Deuteronomy 6:20), that the Wise Son uses, which makes him akin to the Wicked Son who uses the phrase "*lakhem*," "to you" (Exodus 12:26).

But the teacher must understand that the question springs from the Wise Son's passion for learning the mitzvot. Accordingly, the approach to him must be like the laws of the *pesaḥ – ein maftirin aḥar ha-pesaḥ afikoman*,[8] that one may not eat anything after the *pesaḥ*.[9] This is intended to show the *ḥavivut ha-mitzvah*. This is how the teacher should understand the probing of the Wise Son. The Wise Son wants to remain with a taste of the *pesaḥ* in his mouth, something that he can always savor.

To illustrate the inherent danger of certitude, we look at the Wicked Son. The Wicked Son takes what appears as logical, the *korban pesaḥ*, and is sure that he understands it totally, and complains, "What is this service to you?" (Exodus 12:26). The *Beit ha-Levi* says that the Wicked Son is very sophisticated. He does not want to nullify the mitzvot.[10] No. He wants only to introduce something irrelevant.

The Wicked Son does not get an answer. We blunt his teeth by teaching the Son Who Does Not Know How to Ask. Both the Wicked

7. *Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, Parashat ha-Ḥodesh* 23, s.v. "*dabru*"; *Yalkut Shimoni, Bo* 191.
8. *Haggadah, Maggid; Mekhilta, Bo* 18, s.v. "*ve-hayah ki yish'alekha*."
9. Mishnah, *Pesaḥim* 10:8; *Pesaḥim* 119b.
10. R. Yosef Dov Soloveitchik (*Beit ha-Levi*, Belarus, 1820–1892), *Beit ha-Levi al Derush u-Milei de-Aggadata* (Jerusalem, 1985), *Bo*, s.v. "*ve-higgadeta le-vinkha*."

Son and the Son Who Does Not Know How to Ask get the same answer.[11] By upgrading society's moral climate, the Wicked Son will disappear.

The Simple Son asks, "*Mah zot*?," "What is this?" (Exodus 13:14). During the Seder, as the *Keli Yakar* points out, the Simple Son is being fed exotic foods and delicacies, so he asks nothing.[12] But the next day, *maḥar*, when he is asked to redeem his firstborn, he asks, "*Mah zot*?" He does not want to part with the five coins. This goes beyond *derekh ha-melitzah* (satire) because what best arouses someone's curiosity is not being a passive spectator, but real involvement on a personal and financial basis.

Two of the questions, those of the Wise Son and the Simple Son, are asked *maḥar* to show that the Four Sons are really cyclical.[13] The same child who is today the Wicked Son can someday be the Wise Son. There might *ḥas ve-shalom* be a retrogression. If the Wise Son is rebuffed, he might turn into the Wicked Son. The Wicked Son might then lose interest, and turn into the Simple Son. The Simple Son could then be lost completely, becoming the Son Who Does Not Know How to Ask.

But indeed the reverse is also possible. The Son Who Does Not Know How to Ask could become the Wicked Son, which is a slight reversion, but eventually could become the Wise Son.

Yesh maḥar she-hu aḥar zeman, "there is a tomorrow that is after a long period of time."[14] So patience is needed in bridging the generation gap.

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11. In the Haggadah, the answer to the Wicked Son and the Son Who Does Not Know How to Ask is: "It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt" (Exodus 13:8). The answer provided to the Wicked Son in the Torah, by contrast, is: "It is a *pesaḥ* feast offering to Hashem Who passed over the houses of the Children of Israel in Egypt when He smote the Egyptians, but He saved our households" (Exodus 12:27). See R. Ephraim Solomon b. Aaron of Luntshits (*Keli Yakar*, Łęczyca, 1550–1619), *Keli Yakar* to Exodus 12:26.
12. *Keli Yakar* to Exodus 13:14.
13. R. Isaac Nissenbaum (Poland, 1868–1942), *Hagut Lev* (Vilna: L. Apel, 1910), 142–144; R. Mosheh Yaakov Weingarten, *Ha-Seder ha-Arukh* (Jerusalem: Otzer ha-Mo'adim, 2011), 143.
14. R. Solomon b. Isaac (*Rashi*, France, 1040–1105), *Rashi* to Deuteronomy 6:20.

Passover

Excerpt from ***Derash Yehonatan:***
Around the Year with Rav Yehonatan Eybeshitz
by Rabbi Shalom Hammer

THE PURPOSE OF THE PASSOVER SEDER

The purpose of the Passover Seder can be learned from the seemingly unrelated mitzva of *egla arufa* – the heifer whose neck is broken (Deut. 21:1–9). This mitzva stresses the vital place spiritual growth has in the Jew's life. When a corpse is discovered between two cities, and the evidence seems to point to a murder, the elders of the city closest to the corpse must take a heifer and kill it in a "*naḥal eitan*." According to one interpretation, a *naḥal eitan* is a valley that "bears no fruit," i.e., is denuded of vegetation and has no potential for growth.[1] Rav Yehonatan explains that just as a tree produces fruit to ensure its continuity, man performs mitzvot and raises children for the sake of perpetuating Judaism's future. The corpse found between the cities is unidentified. The unfortunate victim has no known children or family, nor can he fulfill mitzvot any longer. He therefore symbolizes someone who "bears no fruit," because for all intents and purposes he has no way to continue to forge a lasting connection to Hashem. The *naḥal eitan* represents the absolute inability of this Jew to fulfill his primary spiritual purpose.

1. Rashi on Deut. 21:4.

Some people believe that accomplishments can be gauged by financial success. They are wrong. From a Torah perspective, success is measured by the level of dedication to Hashem, knowledge of His Torah, the constant striving to accumulate ever more Torah knowledge, and the unrelenting demonstration of the importance of passing on this dedication to the next generation as well. When we sit at the Seder with our families, we transmit the message that we left Egypt in order to become servants of Hashem. In doing so, we once again remind ourselves of the Jewish people's purpose, and encourage the younger generation to make this message a central element in their lives as well.

REMEMBERING THE EXODUS

The Talmud, in a passage included in the Passover Haggada, discusses the mitzva to remember the Exodus every day:

> Rabbi Elazar ben Azarya said, "I am like a man of seventy, yet I was unable to understand the reason why the departure from Egypt should be related at night until Ben Zoma deduced it from the verse, 'That you may remember the day of going forth from the land of Egypt all the days of your life' (Deut. 16:3) – 'The days of your life' implies days only, 'all the days of your life' includes the nights as well." The Sages say, "'The days of your life'" implies this life, 'all the days of your life' implies the days of the Messiah."[2]

Our Sages ordained that this mitzva can be accomplished by including a recounting of the Exodus in the daily reading of the *Shema* and its blessings. Why does Ben Zoma interpret the phrase "all the days of your life" to obligate us to remember and mention the Exodus from Egypt both during the day and the night, while the other rabbis declare that it obligates us to remember the Exodus both during this era and the messianic era? What is the basis of their disagreement?

The roots of this dispute may be found in Shemuel's declaration in the Talmud: "There is no difference between the contemporary era

2. Berakhot 12b.

and the messianic era other than the Jewish nation's subjugation to foreign nations."[3] Rabbeinu Asher, the Rosh, explains that Shemuel's contention is that even during the messianic era, the Jews will be obligated to fulfill all of the Torah's commandments. Other talmudic sages disagree with Shemuel, maintaining that certain commandments will no longer be obligatory.[4]

Ben Zoma, like Shemuel, is of the opinion that all the mitzvot will continue to apply even after the Messiah's arrival, so there is no need for a special verse to teach that the mitzva to remind ourselves of the Exodus will remain in the messianic era. Rather, Ben Zoma contends that this verse teaches us about the obligation to also mention the Exodus at night, as one might have assumed that once a day, in the morning, is sufficient. The rabbis who disagree with Ben Zoma believe that certain mitzvot will no longer apply in the messianic era, and therefore, the addition of "all the days of your life" comes to teach that remembering the Exodus from Egypt will remain obligatory even in the messianic era.

REMEMBERING THE PAST AS THE KEY TO PERPETUATING THE FUTURE

During the recital of the Haggada, we make reference to the four sons: the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the one who cannot even ask. The wise son asks, "What are the testimonies, decrees, and commandments which Hashem, our God, has commanded you?" Once the wise son has received his response, the wicked son, the *rasha*, then asks, "What is this service to you?" The last question asked, that of the simple son, follows: "What is this?" The phrasing of these questions is troubling. The *rasha's* question really seems to be quite similar to that of the wise son or the simple son. Even if he has "removed himself from the community," as the Haggada attests, it is not immediately apparent why he deserves to be called wicked.

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3. *Ibid.,* 34b.
4. Rashi on Avoda Zara 4b, Shabbat 151b, and other places. It should be noted that perhaps many of these sources refer to the obligation of souls to observe the commandments after death. Other midrashim refer to the suspension of the sacrificial service.

The prophet Jeremiah wrote in Lamentations, "Jerusalem remembered in the days of her affliction and of her anguish all her treasures that she had from the days of old; now that her people fall by the hand of the adversary and no one helps her, the adversaries have seen her, they have mocked at her desolations" (Lam. 1:7). Jeremiah begged the Jews to keep Jerusalem alive in their memories, both her "days of affliction and anguish" and "her treasures from the days of old." One who does so is praiseworthy, and one who does not do so joins the ranks of the wicked, who "mocked" Jerusalem in her desolation, doing nothing to perpetuate her memory. Jeremiah reminded the Jewish people of the importance of remembering their history. The Jewish people's first taste of suffering took place in Egypt, and therefore, every Shabbat and Jewish holiday is dedicated to commemorating the Exodus from Egypt. The Jews believe that remembering and recounting the past will facilitate their future redemption.

The wicked son sees no significance in remembering or learning from history. He rejects the entire notion of the Seder because he cannot understand why the Jewish people are commanded to remember the Exodus while still mired in exile. Unfortunately, he fails to realize that by remembering their history, Jews strengthen their allegiance to their people and ensure a Jewish future.

Author's Note

When Balak, the King of Moab, wanted to destroy Benei Yisrael, he hired Balaam to curse them. Balak's messengers described Benei Yisrael as "a people [that] has come out of Egypt" (Num. 22:5). Balaam, in speaking with Hashem about his mission, described Benei Yisrael as "the people coming out of Egypt" (Num. 22:11) in the present tense. Rabbi Moshe Feinstein pointed out that Balak's messengers used proper grammar in describing Benei Yisrael by using the past tense, whereas Balaam's usage is surprising. Why did he say Benei Yisrael were leaving Egypt if they had left many years beforehand?

Rabbi Feinstein explained that Benei Yisrael relives its history on a daily basis. History is not only the story of the past; it is the key to ensuring the future, and Balaam was aware of this. He understood that Benei Yisrael commemorate their exodus from Egypt every day

because celebrating their past is central to their greatness and, as such, when contemplating his mission to curse Benei Yisrael, Balaam described Benei Yisrael as a people still coming out of Egypt.

I once visited Auschwitz with a group of students. As we entered the ruins of the gas chambers, I noticed a sign on the entrance that quoted twentieth-century historian George Santayana: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The Jewish people have known this for over two millennia. No matter how unpleasant and disheartening history has been, the Jewish people have always been expected to remember their time in exile in order to facilitate the ultimate redemption.

Unfortunately, our generation has not always demonstrated the same urgency to identify with their past, as the majority of Jews today remain unaffiliated. In Israel, many Jewish Israelis are completely unfamiliar with certain basic Jewish concepts and facts. On a positive note, the Israel Democracy Institute conducted a survey and released a study recently which revealed that the average Israeli will label himself "Jewish" before he calls himself "Israeli." In addition, since the turn of the century there has been an increased interest by Israelis to identify with tradition, and 80 percent of the sample group surveyed revealed that they believe in God, 72 percent believe in the power of prayer, and 62–65 percent expressed that the Torah is supreme and that the Jewish people are indeed the "chosen nation." These are encouraging statistics and I believe that the more Judaism is "marketed" in a non-coercive fashion, through tolerance and respectful dialogue the more interest there will be for Jews to once again identify with their heritage.

HASHEM'S SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP WITH BENEI YISRAEL

The Torah reports in Exodus 9:33 that prior to praying to Hashem to halt the plague of hail, Moses left Pharaoh's capital city." Rashi (*ibid.*, 29) explains that Moses did this because the city was full of idols, and therefore, was an inappropriate place for prayer. Yet, the Torah also tells us that during the plague of the firstborn, Hashem Himself entered the Egyptian cities, smote the Egyptians, and then removed the Jewish people from their midst with His mighty hand. Why did Hashem Him-

self enter the Egyptian cities when he could just as well have sent Moses or an angel to do the job for him?

Normally, the Torah forbids the ritually pure or the sacred from coming into contact with the ritually impure. For instance, a *kohen* must normally avoid any physical contact with a corpse. However, a *kohen* is permitted even to bury several close relatives because of the special relationship he shared with them. This is an example of how an exceptionally close relationship relaxes the ban on coming into contact with impurity.

Similarly, Hashem had an especially close relationship with the Jewish people who are referred to as "the nation close to Him."[5] This is why Hashem could personally redeem Benei Yisrael from Egypt. The close relationship between Hashem and Benei Yisrael allowed Hashem to waive, as it were, the ordinary rules against contact with impurity.

WHY DO WE EAT MATZA WITH THE PASSOVER SACRIFICE?

Both Cain and Abel offered sacrifices to Hashem. Cain, a farmer, offered produce from his fields, and Abel, a shepherd, offered a lamb from his flock. Cain's sacrifice did not find favor in Hashem's eyes, while Abel's did. Envy and a lack of harmony were introduced into the brother's relationship. In a burst of jealous rage, Cain murdered his brother in cold blood.

Eating matza together with the Passover sacrifice atones for this gargantuan sin; matza is made from wheat, a product that grows from the ground, and the Passover sacrifice is a lamb. On Passover, we demonstrate that both the produce of the land and the lamb can be offered together to Hashem, the "Source of all Blessings." The joint offering demonstrates a harmonious relationship between the two and atones for the discord and tragedy that followed Cain's and Abel's sacrifices.

THE THREE MAIN MITZVOT OF SEDER NIGHT

Benei Yisrael performed three mitzvot the night they left Egypt: eating the Passover sacrifice, matza, and bitter herbs. Each of these mitzvot corre-

5. *Tanḥuma, Beshalaḥ* 10.

sponds to one of the three categories of mitzvot given to the Jewish people: mitzvot (commandments), *edot* (testimonies), and *ḥukim* (decrees). The *haftara* for the second day of Passover explains that Hashem wants us to "observe His mitzvot, His *edot,* and His *ḥukot"* (II Kings 23:3), and emphasizes this correspondence.

The word "mitzva" has a similar meaning to the Hebrew word *mishpat*, judgment. Eating the bitter herbs is a mitzva because it reminds us that we were judged and bitterly enslaved in Egypt. Eating matza at the Seder is an *eda*, a testimonial (a commandment whose purpose is clear); we eat it to commemorate our hasty departure from Egypt. Consuming the Passover sacrifice is the fulfillment of a *ḥok*, a commandment with clearly delineated halakhic guidelines and no immediately clear purpose, which is expressly labeled as a decree in the biblical verse that describes it: "Hashem said to Moses and Aaron, 'This is the decree of [*ḥukat*] the Passover offering'" (Ex. 12:43).

The wise son also refers to these three mitzva categories and their fulfillment at the Seder when he asks: "What are the testimonies, decrees, and commandments which Hashem, our God, has commanded you?" (Deut. 6:20). Clearly, he longs to comprehend what each type of mitzva represents. In answer, the Haggada emphasizes the faith in Hashem demonstrated by Benei Yisrael, when they performed these mitzvot at the time of the Exodus. Benei Yisrael followed Hashem into the desert with virtually no food. They fled Egypt with only half-baked crackers, the matzot, to sustain them. They followed Hashem's instructions to eat bitter herbs – which facilitate rapid digestion, and His command to consume roasted meat – which itself is digested rapidly, clearly demonstrating their faith that Hashem would provide sustenance in the desert.

However, if Benei Yisrael knew that Hashem would provide them with manna in the desert, then leaving Egypt without proper rations and consuming all of these foods would not have been such an exceptional expression of faith. After all, if they were expecting manna to fall from the heavens, it would not matter how quickly they needed more food. The wise son's question, on a more profound level, raises this issue. He understands that Benei Yisrael performed the testimonies (matza), the commandments (bitter herbs), and the decrees (Passover

sacrifice) at the time of the Exodus. However, according to Rav Yehonatan, he is also questioning the depth of Benei Yisrael's faith: Did they know the manna would fall?

The Haggada's response to the wise son reveals that the Jewish people did not know about the manna when they left Egypt: "Therefore explain to him the laws of the Passover offering, that one may not eat dessert (*afikoman)*, after the final taste of the Passover offering." The *afikoman* is actually a combination of two words, "*afik"* and "*man*," which together mean "no manna." The Haggada teaches the wise son that when Benei Yisrael offered the Passover sacrifice, they had no inkling that "a taste of manna" would follow it. So they demonstrated complete faith when they performed the three mitzvot on Seder night and left Egypt without sufficient provisions.

The prophet Jeremiah refers to this exceptional faith: "Thus said Hashem: 'I recall for you the kindness of your youth, the love of your nuptials, your following Me into the wilderness, into an unsown land'" (Jer. 2:2). Hashem promises to have mercy on Benei Yisrael because of the faith they demonstrated in their youth, as a newborn nation, just redeemed from slavery. The Jewish people followed Hashem into the wilderness, into an unsown land, with no knowledge that He would rain down sustenance for them.

The Passover Seder and its symbols, in representing all three groups of mitzvot, reinforce for us the understanding of the great faith shown by Benei Yisrael when they left Egypt. When we commemorate the Exodus from Egypt, by fulfilling a mitzva from each of these categories, we remember this faith and demonstrate our own dedication to Hashem and His entire Torah.

Va'era

Stories That Happen to Storytellers

By Rabbi Yakov Nagen
Excerpt from ***Be Become Bless: Jewish Spirituality between East and West***

The Exodus is a success story with a dramatic plot – a weakling slave nation that goes up against the most powerful nation of that ancient age and wins its freedom. Some might claim that the theme of the underdog overcoming a cruel, powerful master is a stale cliché, but that would be like complaining that Shakespeare is trite. The point is that the Bible, like Shakespeare, is the source and not the imitation. The Exodus story is very vividly drawn and sparkling with special effects. It features seemingly humorous elements, like the plague of frogs, alongside ones that inspire terror – the Nile waters turning into blood, the pitch dark, etc. And then, when it seems as though all the special effects have been exhausted, we have the ultimate set piece – the Splitting of the Sea.

The setting also informs the sense of enchantment – not some backwater, but a land of magic and mystery, the Egypt of pharaohs and mummies, wizards and pyramids. The combination of setting, plot, and

special effects fires the imagination. It is no wonder, then, that the movies made about the Exodus – from Cecil B. Demille's *Ten Commandments* to Dreamworks' *Prince of Egypt* – have been blockbusters.

That would seem to be a happy chance, considering that the Exodus was a foundational event in the history of the Jewish people, imparted and studied for more than three thousand years. We are enjoined to remember it daily, and to retell it as a story at the Passover Seder, so it is a good thing that we find it so agreeable to the imagination. Yet, it turns out that it is deliberate: when God tells Moses, in the beginning of our *parasha*, how the Jewish people's most formative experience – an event of patent historical significance – will play out, we learn that He will harden the heart of Pharaoh, who will refuse to free the Israelites despite the plagues that will afflict his people. Why does God harden Pharaoh's heart?

When I was a child, I thought the purpose is to punish Egypt, but the biblical text offers an entirely different reason: "And that you may tell in the ears of your son, and of your son's son, what I have wrought upon Egypt" (Ex. 10:2). It is not enough for God to bring the Israelites out of Egypt; He wants a monumental story that will be told for posterity, and thus has to quell Pharaoh's freedom of choice so that he will not free the Israelites too soon.

A STORY ABOUT A STORY

The novelist Paul Auster once wrote that "stories happen only to those who are able to tell them." It is an insight that can be extended to storytelling nations as well. The events of the Exodus take place so that there will be a story to tell, and the Jewish people's retelling of the story throughout the generations – each formulating its identity by reading its own experiences in light of the foundational narrative – spins ever more secondary tales. "In every generation a person must regard himself as though he personally had gone out of Egypt," the Mishna (Pesaḥim 10:5) says. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the former chief rabbi of Britain, once said that the relation between the Jewish people and the Exodus was not a nation that has a story but a story that has a nation.

One example of inspiration drawn from the Exodus is the protests calling for the release of Soviet Jewry, which were always accompanied

by cries of "Let my people go!" Another is the civil rights struggle in the US, led by Martin Luther King, in which the Exodus was a major theme. But the story left its mark on individuals as well as movements: the story of my family also came to pass thanks to the Exodus.

My wife's grandfather, Israel Prize laureate Professor Akiva Ernst Simon, a descendant of Rabbi Akiva Eiger, was born in Germany to an assimilated Jewish family. Until the age of seven he did not even know he was Jewish; and growing up, he was just like any other German boy, his Jewishness only a minor component of his identity. When World War I broke out, he joined the German army, where he first encountered brutal and cruel anti-Semitism. The encounter with his comrades was the first sign that his place in German society was destined to change. One evening, Simon learned that the Jewish soldiers were holding a Passover Seder, a ritual that was utterly foreign to him, and decided to join them. Toward the end, several participants got up and exclaimed enthusiastically, "Next year in Jerusalem!" When Simon asked the young man seated next to him why they were standing, he was told, "Those people are Zionists. They want to emphasize that the Jewish people should return to the Land of Israel."

"At that moment, my life changed," Simon would relate when recalling the story over the years. "I, too, rose to my feet, slowly, and thought, *I want to be a Jew. I want to be a Zionist. I want to immigrate to the Land of Israel!*" As soon as he was discharged, he began to learn Hebrew, study Torah, and take on mitzvot, and a few years later he fulfilled his dream of moving to the Land of Israel.

BETWEEN EGYPTIAN IMMORTALITY AND JEWISH ETERNITY

I once heard Rabbi Sacks tell of two ancient nations that sought eternity and found it. The Egyptians immortalized themselves by building magnificent monuments to withstand the winds of time – the pyramids, which stand to this day throughout the desert. The Israelites, too, found their way to eternity, but through a different approach. In his first address to the children of Israel, even before the Exodus is completed, Moses entreats his flock to tell their children and their children's children what they have seen. Since then, every generation has carried out Moses' will, and the Jewish tradition is thus maintained through

the living bond between parents and children. The Jewish eternity is handed down for posterity.

Once, during a family visit with my parents in the US, my wife, Michal, took our children to the department of Egyptian art at the Met in New York. As soon as they entered the gallery, my youngest ran to a large Sphinx sculpture and sat between its paws. Of course, from that moment onward, one of the museum guards, an older, heavyset man, followed them around, keeping a close watch wherever they went. Michal told the children about the sculptures and about Egyptian culture, lowering her voice so as not to disturb the guard, but he only leaned in to listen more closely. When they emerged from the Egyptian art wing, he approached them and asked with amazement, "Is that Hebrew your children are speaking?"

The guard, a devout Christian, was well versed in the Exodus story. Yet, he was astounded, thousands of years after the fact, to meet a Jewish family from Israel whose children still speak the language of the Bible – the same language spoken by their forefathers as they made their way from Egypt to the Land of Israel. The Jewish people's victory over Egyptian culture is undeniable: Egypt's immortality lies behind glass in museum displays, while the Jewish eternity is alive and vital.

LIFE AS A STORY

When we understand that God shapes reality in order to tell a story, we gain insight into life itself and into God's place in it. *Sefer Yetzira* tells us that the Holy One created the world with storytelling (1:1). A story is not only derived from reality, it is the force shaping it.

Auster, in asserting that "stories happen only to those who are able to tell them," apparently refers to the storyteller's tendency to look at life from a special perspective. The storyteller understands that life itself is a story, one that he learns to read and plumb for meaning. By approaching life as a story, and searching for our place within that story, we learn to embrace the challenges mounted by life and "play" our part in them.

I enjoy stories immensely, but beyond that, I ascribe great significance to their power to guide me and generate new stories. I often find myself in situations where I am compelled to come up with a course of action. Whenever I see similarities between a situation and a story that

once excited me, I know what I have to do, even if it is difficult. A good story is a story that helps me to be better.

The encounter with God in life, the sense that I can see His hand guiding my life, is a fundamental religious experience. In the *Modim* blessing of the daily *Amida* prayer, we say, "We will thank You and declare Your praise…for Your miracles, which are with us every day, and for Your wonders and favors at all times, evening, morning, and noon." We must see God not only in the past, but in the present, too – in our very lives – and we must tell the story.

Bo

The Ḥametz of Idleness

For hundreds of years, the children of Israel await the day when they will be liberated from the yoke of slavery. When that day finally arrives, they are forced to get up and leave immediately – otherwise the Egyptians will have a change of heart and the opportunity will be missed. The Exodus teaches us not to miss opportunities, a goal that is generally very difficult to achieve. In our day-to-day lives we tend to become entrenched in our routines, growing ever more gnarled and sluggish, so that every change, no matter how small, becomes a major complication. By the time we examine the opportunity, make a decision, and initiate action, the window of opportunity has often closed. The etymology of the word "opportunity" (from the Latin *opportūnus,* from *ob-* "toward" + *portus*, "port") recalls a ship coming into harbor. Sometimes, by the time we decide to come aboard, the ship has already sailed for sea, never to return.

CONVERSATIONS WITH THE EVIL INCLINATION

The Passover prohibition against *ḥametz*, or leavened food, is a response to that very human weakness. The Israelites decamp from Egypt in such a hurry that there is not enough time for their dough to leaven and rise. They must accede to life's vagaries and suffice with matzot. They leave as they are, and embark on their journey toward freedom. Yet, among the children of Israel, it seems, there are those who cannot conceive of

setting out without bread. When the time comes to hurry up and leave, they do not heed the call, instead dallying in preparing provisions for the road. But as soon as they finish packing their freshly baked rolls, they learn to their surprise that they are alone in Egypt – the exit gates are closed, the opportunity is gone.

Our sages liken *ḥametz* to the evil inclination. We tend to think of the inclination as a monster, a horned man-devil who goads us into sin, so it seems odd to compare it to *ḥametz*, which is useful, tasty, and nutritious. But the comparison brings us face to face with a far more formidable enemy. In the Talmud we find the following prayer: "Master of the universe, it is known full well to You that our will is to perform Your will, and what prevents us? The yeast in the dough" (Berakhot 17b). Rashi explains that the "yeast" is the evil inclination, which lies in our heart – "the dough" – and "ferments" it. The Hebrew word for "ferments," "*maḥmitz*," relates to both *ḥametz* and "*haḥmatza*," or "missed opportunity." The evil inclination, with which we strive constantly, does not necessarily convince us to do outright evil. But whenever we arrive at a significant crossroads, it tempts us to choose the easy, comfortable fork, to dally and miss the opportunity rather than make an effort and change.

On Passover we read the Song of Songs, which, behind the pretty words, is the tragic story of missed opportunity – a thwarted lovers' tryst. The final verse begins with the words "Make haste, my beloved" – the meeting is missed, the moment slips away. Earlier, we learn of the beloved's longing for her lover's presence: "I sleep, but my heart wakes." And then she hears him: "Hark! My beloved knocks. 'Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled.'" But instead of jumping out of bed and running to open the door for her beloved, she lounges about: "I have put off my coat; how shall I put it on? I have washed my feet; how shall I defile them?" By the time she is done dallying and finally rises to open the door, her lover is gone: "I opened to my beloved; but my beloved had turned away, and was gone. My soul failed me when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer" (5:2–3, 6).

The Song of Songs teaches us to listen for the songs of our own lives. There are those whose entire lives pass them by as they wait to "find love" or "attain enlightenment"; to encounter their "big story," or someone

who knows their purpose or their soulmate – things that do not always arrive. Often those who wait are disappointed to find that the world seems walled off to them, that no one is offering them an opportunity to grow. They are unable to heed the clarion call of life opening its gates for them. The word "*ḥametz*" relates to missed opportunity, and the prohibition against it on Passover teaches us not to pass by opportunities for personal development. As the Midrash says, "Just as one should not be slow to make the matza, lest it leaven, so one should not be slow to perform a religious duty. Rather, if a religious duty comes your way, perform it immediately" (*Mekhilta Bo*, 9).

FEAR OF MISSED OPPORTUNITY

Our generation emphasizes spiritual work motivated more by love and joy than by fear, or *yira*. My wife taught me that the *yira* driving true spirituality is in fact the fear of missed opportunity. Life is so special, every day is so valuable, and it is so easy to miss an opportunity.

A realistic evaluation of life requires the kind of perspective that, sadly, sometimes arrives too late – at death's door. The introspection brought about by the knowledge of imminent death is a recurring trope in our culture. In Tolstoy's classic novella *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, the eponymous hero's terminal illness causes him to reevaluate the emptiness of his life. Only too late does he grasp that his all-consuming focus on climbing the Russian bureaucratic ladder and becoming a "good bourgeois" had kept him from living his life as he truly wanted.

But sometimes people get a second chance. One of the leading candidates in the Democratic Party's presidential primary in 1992 (which was eventually won by Bill Clinton) was Paul Tsongas. During the campaign, Tsongas learned that he had cancer, and decided to back out of the race. A while later it emerged that it had been a mistaken diagnosis and he was fit to run, but he passed up the opportunity. Tsongas explained that he wanted to devote more time to his family. "Nobody on their deathbed has ever said, 'I wish I had spent more time at the office,'" he said. I recall a sign I once saw that sums it all up nicely: "What is the point of being on the fast track when there is no one to hug you at the end?"

Ultimately, we must learn to differentiate between the substantial in life and the trivial, and through that realization to grow. The belief in an afterlife must not erode the understanding that the arena for action is this world. The next world is static; it is only in this reality that life affords us the opportunity to affect our destiny through action.

BETWEEN *ḤAMETZ* AND TURKISH SNUFF

One Passover eve, Rabbi Levi Yitzhak of Berditchev, who was known as the "defense attorney for the Jewish people," assigned a task to two of his followers. He asked the first to go door-to-door and spread news of a sick man who was in need of *ḥametz* to eat. Then he asked the second to collect Turkish snuff for the sick man (at the time, Ottoman goods were outlawed in Russia, where the rebbe lived, due to the war between the two superpowers). A short while later, the first man returned and apologized – he hadn't been able to find any *ḥametz*, for it had all been burned ahead of Passover. A few hours passed and the rebbe's second follower made his entrance, followed by a long convoy of people, all bearing sacks of Turkish snuff. Rabbi Levi looked at his two followers and raised his eyes heavenward. "Master of the universe!" he exclaimed. "Do You see the extent of Your children's love for You? The czar has posted police at every corner to ensure that there is no Turkish snuff, and yet everyone is well stocked. You, on the other hand, have not a single police officer to ensure that there is no *ḥametz*, and behold – all of the homes are devoid of it."

Day Four

The Plagues, Hard Hearts, and Free Will

Excerpt from ***Seder Talk: The Conversational Haggada***
by Dr. Erica Brown

When the heart speaks, the mind finds it indecent to object.

Milan Kundera

The heart beats billions of times in the average lifespan of a human being, about seventy-two beats per minute. In order to hear the heart, our minds have to be very quiet. At these times, our deepest emotions guide our intellect. The heart speaks. It speaks a language without words. In our ineffable moments, laughter and tears are its language. In our withdrawal or anger, the heart speaks the language of self-diminishment or aggrandizement. The heart gives us away when words try to hide what we really mean. When our hearts are touched, and we are moved to feel profoundly, our feelings often inspire goodness or compassion or allow access to our greatest insecurities. When we allow our hearts to speak,

our weaknesses and mistakes become vehicles for deeper understanding, empathy, and learning.

Dr. Brene Brown describes the paradox of this kind of vulnerability in her book *Daring Greatly*, a phrase taken from Theodore Roosevelt's speech "Citizenship in a Republic," where he advises his listeners to take risks and do great things by daring greatly. In Brown's words, "Our willingness to own and engage with our vulnerability determines the depth of our courage and the clarity of our purpose; the level to which we protect ourselves from being vulnerable is a measure of our fear and disconnection."[1]

The heart speaks the language of vulnerability.

In the Hebrew Bible, the heart was the seat of both the emotions *and* the intellect. This perception, shared by most of the ancient world at the time, probably developed from the knowledge that the ever-pumping heart distributed blood to all parts of the body; none remained untouched by the heart's work. In Homeric Greek, Chinese, and Sanskrit, the word for heart incorporates the understanding that it is both a physical organ and a metaphysical center of human consciousness akin to the soul. Blood in the ancient world was, understandably, a sign of life, as we find in Leviticus, "The life (*nefesh*) of the flesh is in the blood" (Lev. 17:11). In Jewish law, we must not drink blood, spill blood, or leave spilled blood uncovered. Leaving blood uncovered indicates disrespect for the sanctity of human life, because blood is regarded as the very soul of human life. If blood is the soul, then the heart moves the soul. It is the command center, so to speak, for human drive, ambition, and intimacy.

The biblical heart is one that has the capacity to hold many complex feelings – ranging from joy to desperation – together. Those entrusted to build the *Mishkan* – the portable Tabernacle – had to be "*ḥakhmei lev*," wise of heart.[2] Those who donated generously to the *Mishkan* were called "*nedivei lev*," giving of heart.[3] God blessed Solomon with a "*lev ḥakham venavon*," a wise and discerning heart, because

1. Brene Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham Books, 2012), 2.
2. For example, see Exodus 28:3, 35:10, and 36:1, 2, 8.
3. See Exodus 35:22.

he asked for the capacity to judge carefully instead of requesting wealth and a long life (1 Kings 3:12). The curses in Deuteronomy remind us that if we forgo a life of commandedness, we will find no peace and have a "*lev rogez,*" an anguished or broken heart (Deut. 28:65). Isaiah mentions "*simḥei lev,*" the happy-hearted (Is. 24:7), and also tells those who are "*nimharei lev,*" of anxious heart, to be strong and unafraid (Is. 35:4). This understanding of the biblical heart begs us to allow and experience a wide emotional range.

In order for the biblical heart to be moved, we must, as we are told at the end of the Book of Deuteronomy (30:6), do something: "The Lord your God *will open up* your heart and the hearts of your offspring to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul in order that you may live." In Hebrew, the term "open" is unusually rendered as "*umal,*" which we would translate literally as God circumcising our hearts. In order for us to experience the heart's range of possible emotions, we need to create a small opening in the heart, a release valve, which enables us to lose the "air" within and create lightness and humility, which enables us to lose the density within and fills the heart with possibility. The thin membrane or covering of the heart – much like the translucent skin of an egg – has to be peeled back and exposed for the heart to do its most critical work. When we do this, the hearts of our offspring will also have greater emotional accessibility; the outcome is not merely so that we can love. We ask God to open our hearts so that we and those who come after us may "live." A life worth living must include the capacity to feel deeply. An open, vulnerable heart is the only way to achieve an honest and authentic life. Charles Dickens reminds us of this with the character of Estella in *Great Expectations,* who says, "Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching, and has taught me to understand what your heart used to be. I have been bent and broken, but – I hope – into a better shape." A broken heart can bend into a better shape. We serve God and others best when we recognize the brokenness, and potential to mend, within us all.

This understanding of heart imagery in the Hebrew Bible helps us put Pharaoh's hard-heartedness within its proper context. The open heart will live. The closed heart will not. Because of the heart's importance in the Hebrew Bible as a vehicle of intimacy and empathy, we realize

that Pharaoh's closed heart will be the source of his own unraveling. The closed heart cannot make itself vulnerable. It cannot feel anguish. It cannot generate compassion. It cannot learn. It feels nothing. If it feels nothing, it can do nothing. No acts of goodness, no moments of mercy, no promotion of justice will come of a closed heart.

THE EGYPTIAN HEART

As in other ancient traditions, the heart was central to Egyptian life and lore as the seat of thought, imagination, and emotion. It powered the mind and was the locus of decision-making. The heart could expand or contract to reflect the temperament or mood of its possessor. The heart, or *ib*, was mythically formed from one drop of the mother's heart at the time of conception but lived on beyond the corporeal life of the human being as the central organ that passed into the afterlife and served as a witness to the life of the person it had occupied.

In ancient Egyptian culture, the pursuit of grace in this life paved the way for a dignified afterlife. Pharaohs stockpiled their futures into pyramids with the belief that they would have the appropriate furniture, food, and accessories to live a grand life of luxury after their time on earth was done. But achieving the afterlife was no easy accomplishment. It required a light heart, a heart as light as a feather. The god who determined the weight of one's heart was Anubis, represented in ancient hieroglyphics as a human with a dog- or jackal-shaped head. In the papyrus of Hu-nefer, Anubis placed the heart on a scale balanced against a feather. If your heart, weighted down by sin and malice, tipped the scales out of your favor, you would be judged a sinner. Your heavy heart would fall to the ground, soon to be consumed by a little dog, Amenit the Devouress, poised at the scale's base. The door to the afterlife would then remain closed. If, however, your heart was equal in weight to the feather or lighter, you earned a good afterlife.[4]

4. See John E. Currid, "Why Did God Harden Pharaoh's Heart?," *Bible Review*, 9[6] (1993): 46–5; John Oswalt, "*kabed*," *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R.L. Harris, G.L. Archer, Jr., and B.K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:426–428; and James Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1958).

> Egyptians, particularly those in senior positions of leadership who were worshipped as gods, were supposed to be pure of heart, which would, in their case, be feather-light.[5]

If, on the other hand, their hearts were weighed down with callousness and stubbornness, they were doomed. Ultimately, no matter how punitive and harsh one's action to others, a hard heart hurt its owner most of all.

THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE PLAGUES AND PHARAOH'S STUBBORN RESPONSE

In Exodus, the heart-hardening process appears most frequently with Pharaoh's reaction to each plague. Like a critic at the theater, Pharaoh proclaimed his response to each plague, most often to dismiss its significance or devastation or to suggest that he could easily imitate it. Few plagues impressed him; they intensified his stubbornness and confirmed his opinion of the Israelites and their God. The plagues induced Pharaoh into a competition with God, a game he readily played with skill and disdain, until he was himself humiliated. This seduction had to take place incrementally and gradually to work. Pharaoh had to regard himself as a winner for the early duration of the power contest so that he would keep going. Abrabanel, the great medieval questioner, asked why Pharaoh would be interested in "Jewish" magic at all (Abrabanel on Ex. 7:9). Indeed, Pharaoh was not in the least impressed. One midrash has Pharaoh amused at the gall of amateur leaders, explaining to Moses and Aaron the puzzling words that were attributed to him: "*Tenu lakhem mofeit*" – perform a marvel for *yourselves* – only yourselves, because these tricks do nothing to move me.

It is not surprising then that Moses began the contest in its initial stages with a miracle easy to best – a staff turned into a snake. Everyone in Pharaoh's court was able to mimic the trick with ease, creating the illusion that the rest of the skirmish would be equally easy. That Aaron's snake swallowed their snakes before turning back into a staff was impressive, but only in the manner of a trick that you imagine you could do if you could figure out its secret. It is at this point that Pharaoh's heart

5. *The Book of the Dead* XXXB as seen in translation in Currid, 50.

first hardened, and we can almost visualize it: "And each cast down his rod and they turned into serpents, but Aaron's rod swallowed their rods. *Yet Pharaoh's heart stiffened, and he did not heed them*, as the Lord said" (Ex. 7:12, 13).

Gustav Dore, in his engraving "Moses and Aaron Before Pharaoh," creates the visual portrait of a callous leader that Exodus, and its commentaries, do with words. In the picture, Pharaoh stands on a highly ornate portico, distinguished from the crowd of courtiers and onlookers that surround him by his headdress and embellished collar, and by the light that Dore draws to his tunic. This ruler of an ancient, powerful empire looks down at Moses and Aaron, and the coiled snake at their feet, from above, with utter disdain and a disgust that suggests they are

Moses and Aaron Before Pharaoh, Gustave Dore

wasting his time with their childish demonstration. One onlooker points to the snake with some interest, but the others seem bored by the whole affair; a woman leans against an ornate pillar decorated in hieroglyphics with the look of someone who is not entertained. Another rests his head on his folded arms over the balustrade and takes a nap. If these are the best signs and wonders Moses and Aaron can muster, then the Israelite God stands to lose the contest of the mighty before it even begins. You can almost watch Pharaoh's heart hardening as we wait for him to turn around and leave, dismissing these two frauds with a wave of the hand. Moses faces Pharaoh – perhaps the artist's way of communicating stubborn tenacity for confrontation that foreshadows Moses' eventual success – while Aaron looks down. We suffer his humiliation with him.

The same attitude held true for the first plague of blood. Impressive as it was to turn a deity into a death warrant, the Nile's new and alarming color did little to tamper with Pharaoh's confidence. He had his magicians replicate the trick and walk away, giving little heed to the Canaanite pests that were Egypt's slave labor force: "And the soothsayers of Egypt did thus with their spells, and Pharaoh's heart *toughened* and he did not heed them, just as the Lord had spoken. And Pharaoh turned and came into his house, and this too *he did not take to heart*" (Ex. 7:22–23). Pharaoh followed the course God had initially predicted. He was indifferent. His magicians could also do such magic. According to one midrash, Pharaoh not only called in his magicians to replicate the plague, he called in schoolchildren, going on to declare, "Even my wife can do this!" (Exodus Rabba 9:14). Pharaoh, before he turned away in disgust, tried to impart a lesson to Moses and Aaron, which forms the backbone of the Exodus narratives: "This is a land of magic. Everyone here can do magic." Moses and Aaron apparently brought an amateur production to sophisticated professionals.

In the biblical narrative, time passed, and God sent Moses back to Pharaoh to inform him that a scourge of frogs was on its way, ramping up the intensity of the plagues, and hinting at a reptilian revenge that takes us all the way back to the first chapter of Genesis. In Genesis, the earth swarmed with a new species of creepy-crawly reptiles. In Exodus 1, this same language was used to describe the sudden population growth among the Jews in Egypt. They did not just give birth. They swarmed,

growing so rapidly that the small family of seventy Jews introduced at the beginning of the book quickly turned into a number beyond count. The plague of frogs symbolized what had happened to the Jews physically: they expanded rapidly in Egypt with a plague-like ferocity. Once again, Pharaoh's magicians imitated the plague, and Pharaoh's heart remained frozen.

Lice became a challenge. The magicians' spells did nothing, and they turned to Pharaoh and proclaimed: "This is the finger of God!" (Ex. 8:15). Paradoxically, they referred to the finger of God, in contrast to the outstretched arm that will be the Israelite reference point for God's power. Pharaoh, however, would still not budge.

After the next three plagues, Moses was told to seek out Pharaoh early in the morning and pronounce that the next punishment would be wrought with a new level of intensity.

> This time I will send all My plagues upon your person and your courtiers and your people, in order that you may know that there is none like Me in the entire world. I could have stretched forth My hand and stricken you and your people with pestilence, and you would have been effaced from the earth. Nevertheless I have spared you for this purpose: in order to show you My power, and in order that My fame resound throughout the world. (Ex. 9:14–16)

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart took place incrementally, with every plague building up another impermeable layer. Up to this point in the narrative, each plague took place beneath the ground, on the ground, or within reach of humans and animals upon the earth. But when the windows of heaven began to pour out their wrath with the plague of hail, Pharaoh could not imitate the miracle, just as he and his conjurers were hopeless to counter the plague of lice, confirming their growing ineptitude. The plague went beyond any hailstorm the Egyptians had experienced to date, as we read in Exodus: "And there was very heavy hail, with fire flashing in the midst of the hail, the likes of which had not been in all the land of Egypt from the time it became a nation" (Ex. 9:24). This may have led to an escalation of concern

among Egyptian commoners that perhaps Pharaoh was not as powerful as he made himself out to be. In the words of one scholar, "The God of the Egyptians was serving as the judge of Pharaoh … Pharaoh was simply judged to be a sinner and worthy of condemnation. This is in striking contrast to the Egyptian belief in Pharaoh's perfection."[6] The God of the Hebrews, in judging Pharaoh, was also asserting divine supremacy. God even "controlled Pharaoh's heart; He could harden it. This demonstrated that only the God of the Hebrews was the true sovereign of the universe."[7]

The contest was over. The hail itself was magnificent, a miracle within a miracle to demonstrate God's great might. Pharaoh finally sent for Moses and Aaron, who had been shamed repeatedly by him. This time a different message awaited. Only when the plagues came from the sky, demonstrating a level of ability that Pharaoh's own magicians could not conjure, did Pharaoh seem even remotely moved to action. Yet despite the slight crack in Pharaoh's hard shell – "This time I have sinned … . The Lord is in the right, and I and my people are in the wrong" (Ex. 9:27) – his confession of inadequacy was quickly revoked: "When Pharaoh saw that the rain and hail and thunder had stopped, he sinned again and hardened his heart, he and his officials" (Ex. 9:34). The heart encased itself further with every layer of built-up hardening.

In the very next chapter – chapter 10 – after the plague of locusts and the devastation of Egypt's farmlands, and right before Egypt was submerged in thick, inky darkness, Pharaoh quickly summoned Moses and Aaron and said, "I stand guilty before the Lord your God and before you. Forgive my offense just this once, and plead with the Lord your God that He remove this death from me" (Ex. 10:16). But after Moses pleaded with God and a strong wind blew the locusts away, the temporary change of conditions brought back Pharaoh's predictable stubbornness. "But the Lord stiffened Pharaoh's heart and he would not let the Israelites go" (Ex. 10:20). The moment of self-reflection lapsed,

6. Currid, 51.
7. Ibid.

and the exposure of his weak self made Pharaoh even more dogmatic in his pursuit of the Israelites.

LATER IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

The plagues were such an impressive battle of wits and might that they are lyrically mentioned in two psalms, 78 and 105, that stress the impact of the plagues as a competition. Psalm 78 makes God into a warrior:

> His fury was sent down upon them, great anger, rage, and distress, a company of messengers of destruction. He cleared a path for His anger; He did not stop short of slaying them, but gave them over to pestilence. He struck every firstborn in Egypt, the first fruits of their vigor in the tents of Ham. (Ps. 78:49–51)

This psalm makes no mention of darkness and covers only seven of the ten plagues, but it is clear that each and every plague afflicted the Egyptian people, impacting the land and animals in different, troubling ways.

In Psalm 105, darkness is mentioned first instead of ninth, and locusts immediately come before the death of the firstborn, but the verses together communicate escalating fear followed by relief:

> He struck their vines and fig tree, broke down the trees of their country. Locusts came at His command, grasshoppers without number. They devoured every green thing in the land; they consumed the produce of the soil. He struck down every firstborn in the land, the first fruit of their vigor. … Egypt rejoiced when they left, for dread of Israel had fallen upon them. (Ps. 105:33–36, 38)

Because of the onslaught of large-scale problems one after another, the Egyptians could not regard them as sporadic and random occurrences that reflected simple bad fortune. And, if Pharaoh continued to believe that all was random or coincidental, the last plague had to prove without a doubt that this was not the case. According to Nahum Sarna, this is why the last plague had to be "wholly outside of human experience, and must defy any rational explanation. It must be clear to all, and

beyond the possibility of misinterpretation, that what took place can only have emanated from a divine source."[8]

Pharaoh ultimately lost his battle with God for authority. In the process, his hubris cost him his son's life in the last plague, the dénouement of an ego-ridden scrimmage. Pharaoh also lost his slave labor force. And when that was all over, he lost his own afterlife because his heart was not pure. It is little wonder that he ran after the Israelites into the wilderness after giving them permission to leave. This was the only loss he thought he could recoup. He could not beat God's dominance. He could not bring back his son. His afterlife was gone. At this point, his only display of power was with those under his subordination, the vestigial reminder of his kingship. Pharaoh chased after the Israelites because he had nothing else to lose.

PHARAOH'S HARD HEART

Without an understanding of the heart-hardening process and its personal consequences, we miss the overall message of the plague narratives. As with the plagues, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart is a gradual process of resistance and recognition. The path to victory over Pharaoh was not linear, but rather a circuitous route of self-confidence that turned to self-criticism and back again. Pharaoh's checkered route to stubbornness is captured by the Hebrew verbs used to tell the story. We begin with the term "*leḥazek*" as part of God's explanation to Moses of what he could expect in his leadership mission: "When you return to Egypt, see that you perform before Pharaoh all the marvels that I have put within your power. I, however, will stiffen his heart so that he will not let the people go" (Ex. 4:21). On the surface, this reading should only have terrified Moses, who already doubted his own capabilities. But God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart takes on a whole other meaning. Moses, who lived in Pharaoh's home and was likely well-versed in Egyptian culture and religion, understood that by hardening Pharaoh's heart God was actually assisting Moses. Would Pharaoh be willing to put his own afterlife at stake for the sake of a free work force? After all,

8. Nahum M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus: The Heritage of Biblical Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 78.

with every move Pharaoh enacted to worsen conditions for his slaves, he injured himself beyond redemption.

Pharaoh miscalculated the risks to himself in his equation of how and why to keep the Israelites under the arm of oppression. Initially, his heart hardened and he enslaved the Israelites to minimize their growing number, to quell the population explosion. But Pharaoh's original motivation – his kernel of suspicion about Israelite loyalty to his people – grew over time into a full-blown perception of personal threat to his dominance as a god of Egypt.

Pharaoh's dogged enslavement and chase after the Israelites became encapsulated in the strange expression, "hardening of the heart." It appears no fewer than twenty-two times in Exodus. Half of these appearances are attributed to Pharaoh's human character flaws. The other half are predetermined by God. The obvious and looming theological question is how Pharaoh can ever be punished for having a hard heart when it was God who hardened it so often for him, effectively ridding him of his free will and the ability to have a change of heart. After the first five plagues, motivated by Pharaoh's competitive stance and stubbornness, Pharaoh's heart was turned over to God who stiffened it, making it less pliable for transformation. Causally speaking, the more Pharaoh behaved in a particular way, the less he could later behave in any other way. In Nahum Sarna's words: "This is the biblical way of asserting that the king's intransigence has by then become habitual and irreversible; his character has become his destiny. He is deprived of the possibility of relenting and is irresistibly impelled to his self-wrought doom."[9] Pharaoh could not have engaged the world any other way. His "moral atrophy" and the "numbing of his soul" were choices he made that tumbled into a place where other choices could not but be made that followed the same immoral direction.[10] Pharaoh got in his own way by deepening a path that eventually became irreversible. Moments of hesitation may have led to eventual redemption had he used them to open a

9. Ibid. 64.
10. Ibid.

cranny into his heart. But his heart closed too rapidly for a sliver of compassion to grow.

LEADERSHIP AND CALLOUSNESS

In *The Art of Possibility*, Rosemund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander discuss what they call the creation of the calculating self – the part of us that is "concerned for its survival in a world of scarcity."[11] When our perception of the world around us narrows, we find ourselves in a calculating modality, worried constantly about retaining our place in a world of change and threat. *The Art of Possibility* presents this self as emerging in infancy. The cry of the baby and its demands all say, "Take note of me." Developmentally, this attitude in some never morphs much beyond this need for attention and centrality, evolving into unbearable narcissism:

> A child comes to think of himself as the personality he gets recognition for or, in other words, as the set of patterns of actions and habits of thought that get him out of childhood in one piece. That set, raised to adulthood, is what we are calling the *calculating self*. The prolonged nature of human childhood may contribute to the persistence of these habits long after their usefulness has passed. No matter how confident or well-positioned this adult-self appears, underneath the surface it is weak and sees itself as marginal, at risk of losing everything.[12]

Pharaoh's calculating self changed as the narrative developed. What enhanced his status in chapter 1 ruined him several chapters later. As such, he changed his strategy in managing the Israelites to accommodate his own ego needs, usually ignoring the acute despair of his own people. What began as Pharaoh's defensive calculation to protect the welfare of Egyptian society devolved into promoting his power at the

11. Rosamund Stone Zander and Benjamin Zander, *The Art of Possibility* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 81–2.
12. Ibid.

expense of his subjects. The calculating self must constantly exculpate itself in order to save itself.

Paying close attention to language, we find a new development midway through the Exodus narrative. Before the first plague, God promised Moses an unusual status:

> See, *I place you in the role of God to Pharaoh*, with your brother Aaron as your prophet. You shall repeat all that I command you, and your brother Aaron shall speak to Pharaoh to let the Israelites depart from his land. But I will harden Pharaoh's heart that I may multiply My signs and marvels in the land of Egypt." (Ex. 7:1–3)

Moses was likened to God because he would have power to determine Pharaoh's future by identifying Pharaoh's ego weakness and causing Pharaoh's heart to toughen. The Hebrew here is not "*aḥazek*" but "*akshe*," from the root *k-sh-e*, to toughen. The hardening process is subtle. The Israelites began to dominate Pharaoh's thoughts and stratagems. Anger and resistance gradually turned into self-righteous indignation. The heart is a soft organ. It only hardens when blood stops flowing through it. This takes time. According to Robert Alter, in order for the Israelites to eventually triumph in the face of adversity, Pharaoh had to stay stubbornly callous:

> Whatever the theological difficulties, the general aim of God's allowing, or here causing, Pharaoh to persist in his harshness is made clear: without Pharaoh's resistance, God would not have the opportunity to deploy His great wonders and so demonstrate His insuperable power in history and the emptiness of power attributed to the gods of Egypt.[13]

Egypt was to be a battlefield of wits for the gain of power. The question was not whether the plagues were an impressive bout of showmanship or whether they were convincing. They were a test of authority and knowledge of God. Pharaoh initially rejected any request presented by

13. Alter, 345.

Moses because he did not acknowledge God's rulership: "Who is the Lord, that I should heed His voice to send off Israel? I do not know the Lord, nor will I send off Israel" (Ex. 5:2). The plagues were God's pedagogic tool that would lead Pharaoh to know Him.

The term "*vayeḥazek*" is used as part of the stiffening process in the rest of the story, with one exception.[14] Before the final group of plagues, we find a breaking point introduced by yet another verb change to the root "*kaved*," heavy:

> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Go to Pharaoh. For I have hardened his heart and the hearts of his courtiers in order that I may display these My signs among them and that you may recount in the hearing of your son and your son's sons how I made a mockery of the Egyptians and how I displayed My signs among them – in order that you may know that I am the Lord." (Ex. 10:1–2)

This time, it is not only Pharaoh's heart that becomes intransigent but those of his advisors as well. He will be unmoved and because his advisors are similarly unmoved, they will not persuade him to change his mind, as they might have done before. Not surprisingly, this occurs shortly before the plague of darkness, emblematic of the condition that Pharaoh found himself in at this time. His universe was dimming. Ra, the sun god associated with Pharaoh, was losing his light and capacity to shine. Pharaoh's world shrank. As he tried to narrow the possibilities for Israelite freedom, his own possibilities diminished until, slowly, they disappeared. The obsessiveness with which he demonstrated his might eventually obstructed his view. And that is why the text uses the term "*kaved*." The shell around his heart had stiffened and hardened to the point where it became irreparably heavy. The scales would never tip in his favor. His heart would literally go to the dogs.

The last references to Pharaoh's hardening heart occur twice in rapid succession in Exodus 14 after Pharaoh had finally given the Israelites permission to leave: "When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his courtiers *had a change of heart* about

14. See Exodus 4:21; 9:12; 10:20, 27; 14:4, 8.

the people and said, 'What is this we have done, releasing Israel from our service?' He ordered his chariot and took his men with him.... *The Lord stiffened the heart of Pharaoh*." First Pharaoh's heart changes or reverses its intention (*vayehafekh*) and then it is hardened once again. At this point, Pharaoh could have relinquished his death hold on his slaves. He had already freed them, and they had already fled. They were not there as a physical presence to remind him of his anger. But their absence broadcast his weakness to his people, and in contemplating his inadequacy, his heart again did its dirty work. If the heart is the seat of both the emotions and intelligence, Pharaoh ran out of both.

In her book *Bad Leadership*, Barbara Kellerman identifies callousness as one of the chief behaviors that cause leaders to suffer a bad reputation and contribute to their eventual downfall. Kellerman defines callous leadership as being uncaring or unkind: "Ignored or discounted are the needs, wants, and wishes of most members of the group or organization, especially subordinates."[15] Initially regarded as authoritative, this behavior soon spirals into authoritarian and followers begin to move away from outcomes and begin to question process and trust. Kellerman cites Joseph Rost in *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* who writes that in a perfect world, leadership "is an influence relationship among leaders and followers who intend real changes that reflect their mutual purposes."[16] Kellerman contends that "this definition implies that the exchange is based on influence rather than coercion and that it is multidirectional, with followers influencing leaders and vice versa. It further implies that the mutual purposes are arrived at through negotiation."[17] Yet, in the imperfect world we occupy, many leaders opt for coercion because it is easier for a leader to hear his or her voice than to navigate a path through disparate voices. The very idea that a leader has a choice of behaviors is quite modern. Pharaoh believed himself to be a god and was treated as one. Gods don't need to negotiate.

15. Barbara Kellerman, *Bad Leadership* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004), 119.
16. Joseph Rost, *Leadership for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Praeger, 1991), 102.
17. Kellerman, 119.

Contrast Kellerman's discussion of callousness with an observation made by two contemporary leadership writers about the nature of the heart in leading others:

> The most difficult work of leadership involves learning to experience distress without numbing yourself. The virtue of a sacred heart lies in the courage to maintain your innocence and wonder, your doubt and curiosity, and your compassion and love even through your darkest, most difficult moments. Leading with an open heart means you could be at your lowest point, abandoned by your people and entirely powerless, yet remain receptive to the full range of human emotions without going numb, striking back, or engaging in some other defense.... A sacred heart allows you to feel, hear, and diagnose, even in the midst of your mission, so that you can accurately gauge different situations and respond appropriately.[18]

THE LAST BEAT OF A HEAVY HEART

A sacred heart is a pure heart – one that lives on beyond the beating heart. Pharaoh was not to meet such a glorious end. Driven by anger, Pharaoh himself chased the Israelites to the banks of the Reed Sea. The Israelites were petrified of his oncoming approach until God created an additional, final plague that is never listed as a plague: He opened the sea waters for those worth saving and closed them for those driven by evil. Where Pharaoh stood out from all of his court in the preceding chapters, in death, he was not a god but merely a human of flesh and blood indistinguishable from any of his warriors: "Thus the Lord delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw *the Egyptians* dead on the shore of the sea" (Ex. 14:30). Pharaoh lived as a god but died an ordinary man. His individual death is not even recorded; the Bible reader must but assume that his body, together with his huge Egyptian force, was left to decompose on the banks of a sea that finally engulfed his calculating self. He is not mentioned again in Exodus. There is always a last beat to

18. Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 227–8.

a hardened heart, the beat that ends in self-destruction. Pharaoh could have kept his heart soft and open. He would have saved his people and earned his afterlife. There was a great deal at stake nationally and personally. But his hard heart tipped the scales out of his favor and, ultimately and gratefully, in ours.

LIFE HOMEWORK

- Think of a person or a situation that hardens your heart to a place of rigidity and a point of little compassion. What can you do this Passover to soften your heart a little?
- Name a personal negative character trait you carry that has gotten worse because you failed to deal with it earlier. What can you do to revisit the damage and reverse it?
- Use this Passover as a time to pay attention to your own capacity to remain open and vulnerable. Notice rigidity or closedness in your body language and in your words. Monitor your communication with others for signs of compassion versus signs of harshness.

The Simple Son – What Does He Say?

Excerpt from ***Redemption Then and Now: Pesaḥ Haggada with Essays and Commentary***
by Rabbi Benjamin Blech

Why the Simple Son Is Simple

What is the simple son lacking that makes him simple? His name, *tam*, has two of the three letters that make the Hebrew word for truth, *emet* (spelled *aleph*, *mem*, *tav*). What he lacks is the first letter, *aleph*, signifying "one," which at the very end of the Seder we make clear is the number that represents God. Without God there can be no truth. Without God the two remaining letters in the word for truth connote "death." And without God the reverse of death is to be alive yet unaware of the true meaning of life – to be simple, to be merely a *tam*. It is the role of the simple son's parents to enlighten him about God and His role in history, that "with a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the grip of slavery" (Ex. 13:9). With the knowledge granted to him of the *Aleph* of the universe, the simple son will know the truth – and no longer be simple.

The Simple Son and Job

The simple son of the Haggada is most often viewed in negative terms, the child intellectually immature or perhaps – as we prefer to put it in contemporary terms – mentally challenged. Yet, remarkably enough, one of the most saintly and gifted heroes of the Bible is lauded with precisely this descriptive: "There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was *tam* and righteous, and one who feared God and turned away from evil" (Job 1:1). Clearly, in this verse the word *tam* is meant to be complimentary. Following it we are told that Job was righteous, God-fearing, and someone who "turned away from evil."

Perhaps then, here too in the Haggada the descriptive is not to be taken in a derogatory fashion. This son is "simple" in the sense that, like Job, he is wholehearted and unquestioning in his faith. He is totally committed and unswerving in his acceptance of God. But, also like Job, he is perturbed by the problem which has proven to be the most difficult test of our belief. Theodicy is the thorn in our attachment to our conviction that a just God rules the universe. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do the righteous suffer, even as the wicked often prosper? Why does a God of love permit so much evil on earth? Indeed, there is a great similarity between the cry of Job and that of the "simple son." They are both saying, "What is this? How can this be happening? I do not understand."

The trauma of Job's personal calamities resonates with an earlier biblical national tragedy. Surely the collective body of the children of Israel must have had their faith equally challenged by the inequity of their enslavement, by the harshness of their mistreatment, and by the seeming silence of the Lord to whom they prayed since their ancestor Abraham's discovery of His existence. To teach our children on the night of Passover the story of the miracle of our redemption is to bring up to them as well the reality of our 210 years of slavery and subjugation. We must expect that at least one of them, a child of simple faith, will be moved to say, "How was this possible? What is this? I do not understand God's ways."

Neither theologians nor philosophers have ever been able to come

up with a satisfactory answer. The Book of Job simply makes clear that God's ways are not our ways; that His wisdom transcends our understanding. The Torah tells us, "The secret things belong unto the Lord our God but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut. 29:28). But there is one idea we need to emphasize when our faith is challenged by the incomprehensibility of life's seeming unfairness. *Bad things make us question God; good things force us to reaffirm His ongoing presence and involvement.*

In the aftermath of the death of a loved one, Jewish law demands that we recite the words uttered by Job in his similar circumstance: "The Lord has given and the Lord has taken, blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). Precisely at the painful moment of loss, we need to acknowledge that it came about by the very same hands of the One initially responsible for the blessing previously given. Can we call death cruel when its cause emanates from the very same Source responsible for originally giving life to our loved one?

It is a truth poignantly illustrated in the aftermath of the tragic passing of the two sons of the second-century talmudic sage R. Meir. The scholar was giving a lecture at the synagogue one Shabbat afternoon. At the very same time, unbeknown to him, his two beloved sons suddenly died. The grief-stricken mother, Beruria, covered them with a sheet and waited until her husband came home after Shabbat. When R. Meir arrived and asked where his sons were, his wife begged her husband to first recite the Havdala service, marking the departure of Shabbat. Then, she said that she had a very important question to ask him. Perplexed, but nonetheless acceding to his wife's wishes, R. Meir recited the prayer and then asked his wife to tell him her problem. She said, "Not long ago, some precious jewels were entrusted to my care. Now the owner of the jewels has come to reclaim them. Shall I return them to him?"

R. Meir was surprised by the simplicity of the question and his wife's need to ask him for guidance. "But of course," he said, "you yourself know the law very well. An object entrusted for a time must be given back when the owner demands it." Beruria then took her husband by the hand, led him to where the dead children lay, and

drew back the sheet. R. Meir began to weep uncontrollably. "My sons! My sons!" he cried. Then Beruria tearfully reminded him of his own words, "Did you not say that we must restore to the Owner what He entrusted to our care? Our sons were the jewels that God allowed us to have for some years. Now their Master has taken back His own gifts to us. Let us, even at this tragic moment of loss, feel gratitude for the gift God gave us in all the time we were blessed to have these jewels, our precious children." So too we need always to remember that whatever we have is a gift from God. If it is taken from us, we are not to curse the loss but rather to thank God for however much time we were given to be blessed with His gifts.

"The Lord has given and the Lord has taken." The word used in the Hebrew for "the Lord" is the specific name of God which represents His attribute of goodness and mercy. The challenge for us is to acknowledge the Lord's goodness not only when we consider what He gave us but even when we must cope with the moments when by divine decree we face loss in our lives.

To the "simple" son who seeks solace and a measure of understanding for the unfathomable, the father is told to teach that "with a strong hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the grip of slavery" (Ex. 13:9). True, we suffered. Yet we prevailed. If God saw fit for a while to allow injustice to triumph, the end of the story is by far the more important message. God intervened on behalf of our downtrodden ancestors. God brought our slavery to an end. God took us out of the house of bondage. The transitory success of evil is a challenge to our faith – but the blessings of divine miracles and heavenly intervention are sufficient responses to validate our continued trust in the Almighty.

Passover

Excerpt from ***Rendezvous with God: Revealing the Meaning of the Jewish Holidays and Their Mysterious Rituals***
by Rabbi Nathan Laufer

OBSERVING PASSOVER, RETELLING THE STORY

Why do we celebrate Passover the way that we do? How does the observance of the holiday help us reexperience that meeting with the Divine? On Passover, asking fundamental questions is a core part of the holiday experience. The most outstanding example is the recitation of *Ma Nishtana*, the Four Questions, prior to the *Maggid* portion of the Seder. So essential are questions to the Passover experience that these Four Questions are asked aloud even by a person who conducts the Seder alone, with no interlocutors to address them to (Pesaḥim 116a). Many Passover questions are generated by the celebration itself, which begs us to examine the specific aspects of the holiday whose logic, on the surface, is unclear. For instance:

- Why are the three primary commandments associated with Passover – the removal of all *ḥametz*, the eating of matza, and the retelling of the story of the Exodus on the evening of Passover – so important to the Passover experience?

- Why, when we retell the story, do we use as our sacred text the Passover Haggada, a secondary source composed by the rabbinic sages of the early Common Era – rather than the biblical Book of Exodus? Would it not have made more sense at the Seder to read from our primary source, the Bible itself?
- What is the significance of each item in the sequence of fifteen dramatic and unique Passover rituals that define the Seder? Is the total number of rituals, in some way, meaningful?

Let us begin with our preparations for the holiday to understand why *ḥametz* and matza are so pivotal to reexperiencing the Exodus.

ḤAMETZ AND MATZA ON PASSOVER

As Jewish homemakers know, there is a biblical command to get rid of all of one's leavened products (*ḥametz*) prior to the onset of Passover. Indeed, the elimination of *ḥametz* in traditional households is perhaps the main and most onerous task in preparation for the holiday. The Bible instructs the Jewish people to eat flat, unleavened bread (matza) on Passover, instead of leavened bread, the staple that nourishes much of humanity until today.[1] The Passover Haggada offers two, seemingly contradictory, reasons for why we eat matza on Passover. The first reason, found immediately following *Yaḥatz*, is that matza is the bread of impoverishment ("*laḥma anya*" from the word "*ani*," a poor person) that our ancestors ate in Egypt. Later on, toward the end of *Maggid*, Rabban Gamliel, basing himself on a verse in the Book of Exodus, offers a different reason for eating matza:

> Because the King of kings, The Holy One, Blessed Be He, revealed Himself and redeemed the Jewish people as it is written, "And they baked unleavened flatbread from the dough which they had brought out of Egypt, because it had no time to rise, since they were driven out of Egypt and could not delay; and they made no other provisions of food to carry with them (Ex. 12:39)."

1. For a more thorough investigation of why we eliminate *ḥametz* prior to Passover and instead eat matza, see *Leading the Passover Journey*, 1–6, 40–41.

The disparity between the first reason, in which matza (what the Bible itself later calls "*leḥem oni*") is associated with the impoverishment of the Jewish people in Egypt (Deut. 16:3), and the second reason, which understands matza as the bread of freedom (what the rabbinic tradition later calls "*leḥem deḥeruta*"), has to do with the moment in the Seder when each reason is provided. The "impoverishment" reason is offered immediately following *Yaḥatz* when, in the story traced by the Seder, the Jewish people are still enslaved in Egypt, after Pharaoh's decree of infanticide. The "freedom" reason is offered toward the end of *Maggid*, when, in the Haggada's verbal retelling of the story, the Jews are on their way out of Egypt. The same physical substance, matza, takes on two completely different meanings depending on when and how one relates to it in the course of telling the story – within the chains of bondage, or the exhilaration of freedom.

If matza, in the earlier iteration, while the Jews were still in Egypt, was "poor man's bread," then what was "rich man's bread"? None other than *ḥametz*. *Ḥametz* was rich man's bread in two ways. First, the ingredients, which included fermenting yeast, enriched it (unlike matza, which was made only of flour and water). Second, the time that it took for the dough to rise was a luxury that only the Jewish people's wealthy Egyptian masters could afford.[2] The Jews, under the constant prodding of their taskmasters, were left with no time to breathe (Ex. 6:9), and could not afford the cost or the time of the yeast. The Jewish slaves had to make do with the tasteless, flat, pseudo-bread called matza.

It is precisely because *ḥametz* was associated with the Egyptians, who attained their wealth and their luxurious lifestyle by expropriating our ancestors' slave labor, that the Bible prohibits not only **eating** *ḥametz* but also deriving any benefit from it during – or even following – the holiday. *Ḥametz* on Passover is taboo for the Jewish people because

2. It is common knowledge that fermented bread was invented in ancient Egypt and was itself a form of currency. See, for instance, Jimmy Dunn in "Prices, Wages and Payments in Ancient Egypt": http://www.touregypt.net/featurestories/prices.htm.

the richness with which it is associated is what is called in tort law "the product of unclean hands." In this case, it was the result of the ancient Egyptians' abuse of our ancestors' slave labor. This is why the tradition has us search for *ḥametz* before Passover and dispose of it – in fact, burn it – on the morning prior to the beginning of the holiday.[3] With the *ḥametz* destroyed, and matza spread out on the festival table, the Jewish people are then bidden to retell the Passover story at the evening Seder.

THE PASSOVER SEDER

The Passover Seder reenacts the Jewish journey in the Book of Exodus, from its opening verses in chapter 1 until its closing verses in chapter 40. Rather than the Bible, which was authored centuries before the Common Era, the liturgical text that guides us through the Seder is the Passover Haggada, authored by the rabbis of the Common Era, since it is considerably shorter and more compact, packing greater punch with fewer words. Moses himself modeled the creative and more succinct retelling of the Passover story in the Book of Deuteronomy. There, speaking to the next generation of Jews, who had not themselves experienced the Exodus, he offers several powerful restatements of the Passover tale, which we incorporate into the *Maggid* section of the Haggada.[4]

Notwithstanding the creative retelling by the rabbis of the content of the Passover story, the rabbinic sages followed the Bible in using the three primary human senses to shape the form of their retelling – the visual, the verbal/audial, and the kinesthetic/active senses. For the generation that left Egypt, the visual telling of the Jewish story took the form of the Mishkan, that was placed in the center of the Jewish encampment in the desert and reminded the people of their formative experiences;[5] the verbal/audial telling took

3. The only other commandment aside from *ḥametz* on Passover that has a similar set of laws governing it is idolatry. *Ḥametz* on Passover is like idolatry all year long.
4. Including the Haggada's opening line in response to the Four Questions, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt" (Deut. 6:20), and the centerpiece of *Maggid*, the exegesis of the pilgrims' restating of the Passover journey (Deut. 26:5–8).
5. See the chapter on "The Sacred Space-Time Continuum" later in this volume.

place through the narrative in Exodus and Leviticus; and the active/dramatic telling occurred through the biblical holidays commanded to the Jewish people in chapter 23 of Leviticus. The Haggada too **re**tells the biblical story using all three of the primary human senses, with the Seder plate constituting the visual, *Maggid*, the verbal/audial, and the fifteen dramatic action items at the Seder, the kinesthetic.

The Bible, then, and the Haggada in the times of the rabbinic sages, used all three mediums to tell and retell the story because different people rely on and are motivated by different modes of perception. For some, "seeing is believing." For others, what one hears and repeats is what one remembers. For yet others, only by doing and acting out something is the underlying idea internalized. Both the Bible and the rabbis used all three mediums to assure that the message of the biblical story was effectively communicated.

THE SEDER PLATE – VISUAL RETELLING

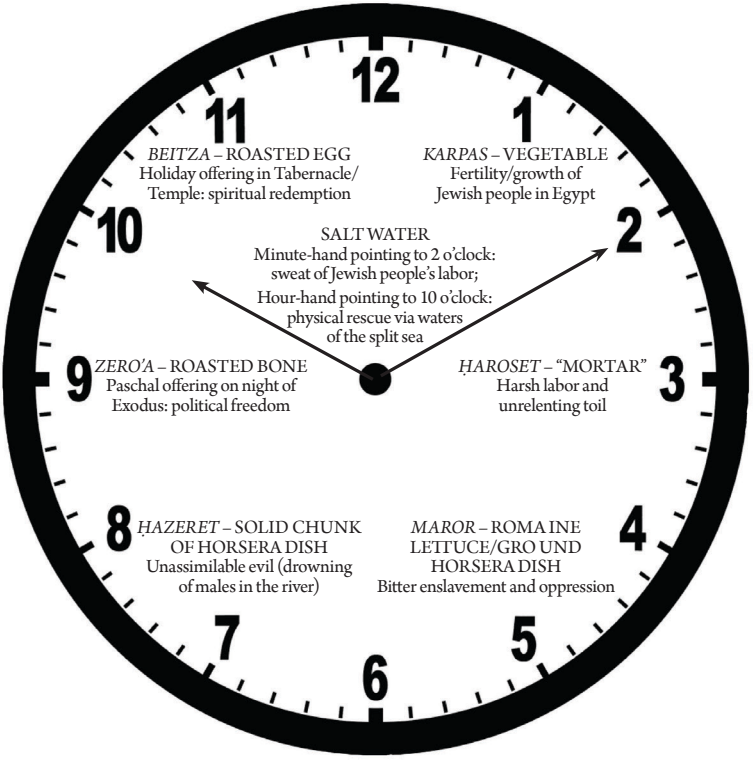
As soon as one approaches the table on Passover, before one has even sat down, one is struck by the visual pageantry on the table, a pageantry that is meant to visually retell the Passover story. In the center of the table, aside from the three matzot that are usually covered, lies the Seder plate. The Seder plate is so called not merely because it is used to conduct the Passover Seder, but because, like the Seder itself, it too has an order, or "*seder*." The order to the plate's arrangement is crucial because it faithfully recreates, in visual form, the story that the plate retells.

There are myriad customs as to the arrangement of the Seder plate.[6] None of these is arbitrary. Rather, each custom represents a different visual interpretation of the crucial elements of the Seder and their role in telling the story of the Exodus. Since I understand the entire Seder to be a chronological representation of the Jewish people's journey in the Book of Exodus, the arrangement of the Seder plate that I have developed mirrors this chronological progression.

6. See Gavriel Zinner, *Nitei Gavriel – Hilkhot Pesach, Ḥelek Beit* (New York: Moriah Press, 1989), 322–323, 658–667, which presents eighteen different Seder plate arrangements.

The Seder plate is arranged in a circle, using the organizing principle of an analog clock telling time (see image on following page).

At one o'clock is the *karpas*, a vegetable, preferably green, like parsley, which symbolizes the prolific growth of the Jewish people in their early years in Egypt (corresponding to Ex. 1:7). At three o'clock is the *ḥaroset*, which simulates mortar and symbolizes Pharaoh's stratagem to put the Jewish people through difficult physical work in order to stem their rate of growth (Ex. 1:11). At the five o'clock station is the *maror*, symbolizing the next step in Pharaoh's nefarious scheme – embittering and oppressing the Jewish people, not merely through hard work, but through harsh, oppressive bondage (Ex. 1:13, 14). At the seven o'clock station is the *ḥazeret* – a solid chunk of ungrated horseradish. Unlike the grated horseradish, this knobby,



The Seder Plate Clock

disfigured chunk is impossible to swallow. The *ḥazeret* embodies Pharaoh's ugly decree of infanticide to cast every newborn Jewish male into the Nile River, a royal order which the Jewish people could not withstand (Ex. 1:22).[7]

At the nine o'clock station is the *zero'a* – the roasted shank bone that symbolizes the Paschal sacrifice that the Jewish people courageously ate on the night of the Exodus (Ex. 12:3–11). The word *zero'a* also presages the "*zero'a netuya*" – God's outstretched arm that split the sea seven days after the Exodus.[8] At the eleven o'clock station is the *beitza* – a roasted egg, symbolizing the festival sacrifice that was brought in the Temple on Passover, and evoking the construction of the Mishkan, the precursor to the Temple, which concludes the Book of Exodus (Ex. 40:34–38). In the center of the plate, our family has the custom of placing a small bowl of salt water in which to dip the *karpas*, the vegetable eaten as the third item in the Seder, and then later to dip a hard-boiled egg before the multi-course meal known as "*Shulḥan Orekh*" (the eleventh item in the Seder).

Like the matza, which symbolizes the bread of suffering and impoverishment in the early part of the Seder ("This is the bread of affliction that our ancestors ate in the land of Egypt") and later symbolizes the bread of redemption when the Jewish people leave Egypt, the salt water too has a double meaning. At the beginning of the Passover saga – signified by two o'clock – it symbolizes the sweat of Jewish slaves toiling under the hot Egyptian sun; toward the latter part of the Passover saga – signified by ten o'clock – it symbolizes the liberating waters of the splitting sea, where the Jewish people were saved. The hands of the clock signal the two opposite sides of the story; the right hand points toward the side of developing suffering, while the left hand points toward developing redemption. What separates the two is the passage of time on the proverbial clock.

7. Unlike Pharaoh's previous attempts to suppress their rate of growth, which the people somehow managed to overcome, the biblical text does not tell us that they continued to proliferate after the infanticide decree – cf. Ex. 1:22 to Ex. 1:12, 17, and 20.
8. See Ex. 14:16, 21, 26, 27.

Altogether, there are seven items on the Seder plate, symbolizing the seven days of Passover which the Seder meal inaugurates.[9]

Thus, the Seder plate that we see in front of us as we take our seats at the table already narrates the story of the Book of Exodus in chronological order, just as the *Maggid* section of the Haggada and the entire Seder will each tell the story of the Passover journey in its own unique, but overlapping way.

THE SEDER'S KINESTHETIC RETELLING

In total, there are fifteen activities in the Passover Seder whose names are chanted or sung, in an almost universal custom, as a type of "Table of Contents" to the proceedings of the evening. A newcomer at a Passover Seder would justifiably wonder why the participants are singing the Table of Contents, instead of delving straight into the evening's program itself. In fact, the fifteen Seder activities and our preliminary chanting of their names are related to several other "fifteens" connected to Passover:

- The holiday of Passover falls on the fifteenth day of the Jewish month of Nisan.
- The song "*Dayenu*," found toward the end of the *Maggid* section of the Seder, also mentions fifteen events for which the participants praise God.
- In the Torah scroll, the central column of the Song of the Sea (sung by the Jewish people after the splitting of the Sea of Reeds) contains fifteen lines that form a sort of ascending ladder (Ex. 15:1–19).

All these fifteens,[10] and the interlacing of songs with most of them, are related to yet another fifteen, the name of God associated with the

9. As we will see later in the book, the number seven is the symbol of the covenantal bond between God and the Jewish people and the organizing numeral of all the biblical holidays.

10. And several more fifteens as well, not directly related to Passover, but linked to encountering God's presence:
    - fifteen Psalms (120–134) that begin with the words, "A Song of Ascents" that were sung by the Levites on the steps leading up to the Temple in Jerusalem;

Exodus and found in the Song of the Sea. The name "*Yah*," the most primal of God's names, comprises the two Hebrew letters *yud* and *heh*, which in *gematria* – Hebrew numerology in which each letter has a numerical equivalent – equal fifteen.

All of the fifteens connected to Passover lead to the experience of, or an encounter with, the Divine Presence. It is not at all surprising that these fifteens are associated with song, because the propensity of the soul when having an experience with the Divine is to break out in song.

But beyond giving song-filled expression to being touched by God, the chanting of the Seder's program also helps to remind the Seder participants of the order of the activities in their proper chronological sequence. After all, the entire purpose of the Seder in the Haggada is to take the Seder participants on a fifteen-step voyage that recreates God's saving presence in the Book of Exodus and makes it their own.

Maggid, the fifth in the sequence of Seder activities, does a masterful job of verbally encapsulating the whole of the Exodus narrative, from the enslavement of the Jewish people until their redemption. Why then, we might ask, do we need the other fourteen activities in the Seder? Because just as the Seder plate is organized to retell the story of the Jewish people's founding event visually, and the *Maggid* will retell the story verbally, so too the other fourteen steps of the Seder are equally important and powerful instruments to retell the Exodus story kinesthetically, through symbolic actions.

WHERE IS MOSES IN THE HAGGADA?

Moses plays a central role throughout the biblical story that the Passover Seder and the Haggada reenact. It is therefore rather strange that in the Haggada's narrative of the story, Moses' name appears only once,[11] and that it is only in an obscure, secondary role, as a proof text for another

- fifteen words chanted in the priestly blessing;
- fifteen words of praise in the "*Yishtabaḥ*" prayer that is recited daily and concludes the "Verses of Praise" section of the morning prayers.

11. In the Ashkenazic Haggada; in the Sephardic version Moses' name does not appear even that one time.

point that the Haggada is making.[12] Why is Moses virtually invisible in the Haggada?

To understand why Moses is hidden in the Haggada's retelling of the Exodus story, why he is *tzafun*, we have to turn to two events in the Book of Exodus. First, when the people, after leaving Egypt, journey in the desert and run out of food, they come running to Moses and Aaron to complain. Strikingly, the people ask them accusingly why **they** took the people out of Egypt if they were fated to perish thirty days later of starvation in the desert. Moses parries their complaints by assuring them that God would provide food for them and rebukes them, insisting that their complaints be directed against God (Ex. 16:3, 7, 8), "for who are we that you lodge your complaints against us" (Ex. 16:7).

Apparently, Moses understood that there was some confusion among the people about who actually took them out of Egypt. Later on, in the events that led up to the Golden Calf, the people said to Aaron, "Make us a god that will lead us, for this man, Moses, who took us out of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Ex. 32:1). Apparently, here too, in even starker form, the people seem to believe that Moses is the divine being who took them out of Egypt.

For this reason, the participants of the Seder, who imagine themselves on the night of Passover as having been themselves liberated from Egypt,[13] leave Moses out of the story. His role in the Exodus is minimized so that God's role is maximized in the retelling. This is also why Elijah makes an unexpected appearance in the story prior to the prayer "Pour Out Your Wrath" (the placeholder for Moses' prayer to God at the sea). Elijah is invoked to represent Moses in disguise. Elijah was the angry prophet of God who, like Moses, had a revelation at Mount Horeb/Sinai and who faced down the idolaters of his generation (I Kings 18–19). Just as Moses had to wear a mask after he came down from Mount Sinai with the second set of tablets containing the Ten Commandments,

12. In the proof text cited by R. Yose HaGelili in the *Maggid* section for how many plagues occurred at the sea, citing the verse: "And they believed in God **and in His servant Moses**" (Ex. 14:31).

13. As the Haggada says toward the end of *Maggid*: "In every generation, each person is to see himself as if he left Egypt."

so that the people would not be blinded by his radiant presence (Ex. 34:29–35), in the Haggada he must also be "masked," hidden, disguised as Elijah, so that his radiant visage does not blind the Seder participants to God's presence.

The point and purpose of Passover, the first of the year's biblical holidays, and its reliving of the biblical events that it commemorates, is to firmly anchor the people's relationship with God. It is to remember God's redemption of the Jewish people when no human being, not even as great a "miracle worker" as Moses,[14] could or would rescue them. As the author of the Haggada states at the beginning of *Maggid*: "If The Holy One, Blessed Be He, had not taken us out of Egypt, then we, and our children, and our children's children would still be enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt." Moses is made virtually invisible to instill in us today an attitude of gratitude to God for His redemption. We rendezvous with God, as God rendezvoused with our ancestors. That attitude of indebtedness finds expression in our people's loyalty to God and God's Torah whose story and reenactment have sustained our people for thousands of years. We are only Jews today because of those saving events of three millennia ago and because of the Torah's story of those events, which has been passed down to us from generation to generation.

AND WHERE IS THE LAND OF ISRAEL?

In the biblical narrative, the promise made to Abraham was not merely that God would redeem his descendants from captivity and punish their oppressors, but that God would return Abraham's descendants to the Land of Israel (Gen. 15:13–21). Indeed, consistent with that promise and God's memory of it, there was a fifth promise of redemption that God made to Moses, found in the Book of Exodus immediately following the first four promises of redemption mentioned previously: "**And I will bring you** to the land which I swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that I would give it – and I will give it to them as an inheritance in perpetuity – I, the EverPresent God" (Ex. 6:8).

Despite this fifth biblical promise, in the retelling of the story of Passover in the Haggada and as part of the Seder, this promise is left

14. See the epitaph to Moses in Deut. 34:11–12.

out.[15] The author of the Haggada, living after the destruction of the Second Temple and the exile of most of the Jewish people from the Land of Israel, could not include this promise, which was unfulfilled for them and for roughly nineteen centuries of Jews afterward. There was only a hint to the fifth promise in the Cup of Elijah that sat at the center of the Seder table. That cup – named after the prophet who not only resembled Moses but who, according to the later prophet Malachi, was also to herald the future redemption of the Jewish people and their return to their ancestral land (Mal. 3:23–24) – was traditionally not drunk at the Seder because its promise had not been fulfilled for so many centuries of Jewish life.

Perhaps now that nearly half of the world's Jews have returned over the past century to reinhabit their ancestral homeland, this cup may – perhaps should – be drunk at the Seder.[16] The most appropriate time to do so might be at the very end of the Seder before singing "Next Year in Jerusalem," in recognition and gratitude for God's fulfilling the promise to Abraham in our parents', and in our, generation. Coming, as it does, after the participants have already drunk four cups of wine and may be edging toward intoxication, the fifth cup of Elijah could be shared among all the Seder participants. This "taste of redemption" would convey the reality that although a substantial portion of the Jewish people has returned to the Promised Land, a substantial portion has not, nor is the biblical dream of a rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem yet a reality. So the redemption which we have been privileged to witness and experience is not complete.

This sharing of the cup of Elijah would also point to a cautionary tale from the prologue to the story of the Exodus: a lack of fraternal

15. It is also left out of the core of *Maggid*, the paragraph of "*Arami oved avi*" – the pilgrim's declaration recited as he brings the first fruits to Jerusalem, upon which the Haggada weaves an elaborate midrash (as per the instructions of Mishna Pesaḥim 10:4). In the Haggada, the pilgrims' formulation is truncated and does not include the verse, "And He brought me to this place, and He gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Deut. 26:9).

16. Maimonides rules that a fifth cup may be drunk; however, he suggests doing so prior to reciting Psalm 136, "the Great Hallel" (*Mishneh Torah*, Laws of *Ḥametz* and Matza 8:10).

solidarity, between Joseph and his brothers, is what led to the enslavement of the Jewish people in the first place. Therefore, only by sharing this cup of redemption in communal solidarity will the Land of Israel under Jewish sovereignty remain an "inheritance in perpetuity" as God promised.[17]

17. "And I will give it to them as an inheritance in perpetuity, I the EverPresent God" (Ex. 6:8). See also the brief discussion of the modern holiday of Yom Yerushalayim (Jerusalem Day) in chapter 8 of this volume entitled, "The Hiddenness of God."

Day 35

Filling the Gaps in Religious Law

Excerpt from ***With Liberty and Justice: The Fifty-Day Journey from Egypt to Sinai***
by Senator Joe Lieberman with Rabbi Ari D. Kahn

As comprehensive and all-encompassing as the laws emanating from the Bible are, there are behaviors that the Bible does not specifically approve or prohibit and that the rabbis have not addressed. What is the person who aspires to live by the Law to do with regard to these?

The answer seems to be to internalize the values that emerge from the Torah and apply them to all our behaviors in the way that we believe best realizes those values. In the Book of Deuteronomy, Moses offers the following counsel, after repeating the mandate to keep God's commandments and statutes: "And you shall do that which is right and good in the sight of the Lord" (Deut. 6:18).

When the Torah and rabbis are silent, the guiding principle for personal behavior should therefore be what is "right and good in the sight of the Lord." That is also described in brief as "*kiddush Hashem*," "the sanctification of God's name."

To what extent should the values of the society in which one lives fill the spaces that religious law leaves open, as the individual tries to decide how to honor God's name? In an essay on this question, our son, Rabbi Ethan Tucker of Yeshivat Mechon Hadar, cites Moses' counsel to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4:6:

> Guard and perform [the mitzvot], for doing so is your wisdom and understanding in the eyes of the nations. When they hear all of these rules, they will say, "What a wise and understanding people is this great nation."

These verses essentially define *kiddush Hashem*. We sanctify God's name by acting ethically, according to God's Law, and thereby engender the admiration of the broader community for this Law. The behavioral standard of *kiddush Hashem* is about the third-party perception of God and the Law, based on our behavior.

Rabbi Tucker takes the discussion of what to do when the Bible and Talmud are silent a step further by quoting Rabbi Moshe Shmuel Glasner, a Hungarian rabbi of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries:

> If one violates anything that is agreed upon as abominable by enlightened people, even if it is not explicitly forbidden by the Torah, he is worse than one who violates one of the laws of the Torah.

For example, the Bible does not say, "Don't eat a sandwich that has fallen into the gutter and is covered with polluted slime." But eating such a sandwich would be offensive to any civilized person, and it is therefore prohibited as part of the "internal Torah command … to be holy." [1]

1. Rabbi Ethan Tucker, "Ethical Norms as the Foundation of Torah," *Parashat VaEtchanan* (Mechon Hadar Center for Jewish Law and Values, Av 5776), 3.

But what if one's idea of *kiddush Hashem* is at variance with public opinion on a particular matter? What if the societal value is not as self-evident as in the case of the defiled sandwich? What if the prevailing societal view of an act not specifically prohibited by Jewish law is inconsistent with the "internal Torah command … to be holy"? In such a case, I would recommend breaking from the societal norm and honoring God's name. Such action would represent the Jewish and Torah view of what is ultimately "right and good."

From my reading of history and my personal experience in government, I know of many sad cases where leaders were not brave enough to renounce societal norms and do the "right and the good." But I also know that the past is rich with cases of leaders who have had the courage to do what they thought was right, even when it was not popular.

Day 36

Reward and Punishment

The biblical laws are not merely precatory invocations for good behavior. They include a system of rewards and punishments that lend internal force to the specific laws and commandments. The Ten Commandments themselves contain several mentions of rewards and punishments, including the broad promise of the Second Commandment that God will show kindness to thousands of generations of those who love and obey Him. This indeed is a strong incentive to live according to the Law.

This concept of reward and punishment established a standard for all systems of law that followed. Both biblical and secular laws since then include specific penalties to dissuade people from violating them.

But when it comes to rewards for obeying the laws, the biblical and secular systems are very different. The rewards for not violating secular laws are indirect: you avoid the penalties that result from illegal behavior, and you have the satisfaction of knowing you did the right thing. In the biblical legal system, there are significant rewards for following the commandments and the law. They range from the earthly and agricultural to the messianic and eternal.

These rewards are enumerated in the Bible, with some repeated in our daily prayers. For example, twice daily, we follow the recitation of the *Shema Yisrael* declaration of monotheism from Deuteronomy chapter 6,

"Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One" (v. 4), with a paragraph from Deuteronomy chapter 11, which delineates the biblical rewards for following the law and living by the values of the commandments:

> If you indeed heed My commandments with which I charge you today, to love the Lord your God and worship Him with all your heart and with all your soul, I will give you rain in your land in its season … and you shall gather in your grain, wine, and oil. I will give grass in your field for your cattle, and you shall eat and be satisfied. (Vv. 13–15)

The most basic rewards for loving God and heeding His commandments are agricultural. From the time the Torah was given through the period of the two Temples in Jerusalem (and again today in modern Israel), agricultural blessings were existential blessings.

The *Shema* continues with the penalty for failing to obey God's commandments:

> Be careful lest your heart be tempted and you go astray and worship other gods … then the Lord's anger will flare against you and He will close the heavens so that there will be no rain … and you will perish [or, be banished] from the good land that the Lord is giving you. (Vv. 16–17)

But the Torah, and the *Keriat Shema* which quotes it, also teach how to avoid this terrible fate: by instilling the word of God in our hearts and souls, binding them on our arms and foreheads (tefillin), teaching them to our children, and writing them on our doorposts (mezuzot). The general reward for upholding God's laws in these ways is "that you and your children may live long in the land that the Lord swore to your ancestors to give them, for as long as the heavens are above the earth" (Deut. 11:21).

The prophets describe additional otherworldly rewards for following the commandments. These are embedded in the traditional prayer service in the prayer "*U'Va LeTziyon Go'el*," "A Redeemer Will Come to Zion," recited both in the daily service and on the Sabbath and holidays:

> Blessed is our God who gave us the Torah of truth, planting within us eternal life. May it be Your will that we keep Your laws in this world, and thus be worthy to live, and inherit goodness and blessing in the Messianic Age, and in the life of the World to Come.

This uplifting vision of the rewards that will accrue to the followers of God's Law compellingly speaks to some of our most profound and perplexing questions: How should I behave? Does anyone care? What are the consequences of good and bad behavior? Is there anything after life on earth?

This dream of heavenly and eternal blessing is the Jewish people's destiny, toward which the entire Bible narrative is directed. Realizing it, however, depends on the way we behave. The kabbalists suggested that the etymology of the word "mitzva," usually translated as "commandment," is actually from the word *betzavta*, which means "together." The secret of the commandments is having a relationship with God, of walking together with God, by observing His law and doing good deeds.

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