

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VA'ERA

JANUARY 12, 2013

1 SHEBAT 5773

Rosh Hodesh Shebat will be celebrated on Shabbat, January 12.

Please pray for a refuah shelemah for Shulamit Bat Feyge Libah

SEPHARDIC CONGREGATION OF LONG BEACH SCHEDULE

Friday, January 11, Erev Shabbat
Candle Lighting - 4:30pm / Mincha - 4:30pm

Shabbat, January 12
Shacharit - 9:00am – Latest Shema is 8:57
Kiddush sponsored by ...
Mincha – Amidah after 12:27
Shabbat Ends - 5:31pm
Return for Arbit at 5:50
Followed by Children's program with Pizza
And a class for adults

Daily Services - Shacharit
Sunday- 8:00am / Monday thru Friday - 7:00am SHARP

The Eruv will not be up this Shabbat -- so please plan accordingly. At the present time we have purchased all of the materials necessary to create the Eruv along Broadway & Shore Roads and work will commence this week. The work is being done by a dedicated group of volunteers. If you can help, please contact Rabbi Colish or Sam Shetrit.

Please see attached Letter, It was suggested that we forward this to the community Long beach residents.

Class with Rabbi Yenay Monday night at 7PM
Please come to welcome back Rabbi Yenay as we begin weekly classes again

ShabbatParshat Bo
Rabbi Abittan's Yahrzeit
Friday Night January 18th Dinner - \$18.00 per person \$10 under 12 -
Please confirm if you are coming and how many
Shabbat Kiddush January 19th in memory of Rabbi Abittan z'sl

Tu Bishvat Meal at Young Israel
Friday night January 25th
We will have a Tu Bishvat Kiddush on Shabbat January 26th

On Saturday, March 2, 2013, The Sephardic Congregation Of Long Beach will host a talk by Dr. Reeva Simon entitled "Jews and Islam: An Inconsistent Relationship. From the Golden Age to Modern Times." Dr. Simon is a former Associate Director of The Middle East Institute at Columbia University and professor of Middle East history at Columbia and Yeshiva Universities and the author of a number of books on the topic

Dr. Simon's talk will begin at 8pm, with a reception to follow. Suggested donation is \$10.

To subscribe or to unsubscribe, please reply to ShabbatShalomNewsletter@gmail.com

Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979 Third Avenue, 17th Floor, Artistic Frame at 4PM – Please join us! 212-289-2100

I want to apologize for missing last week's newsletter (and I understand due to a sending mistake, many of you did not get one the week before either). My dear wife Chantelle was rushed to the hospital last week and has been there since. We want to thank all of you are praying for a refuah shelemah for Shulamit Bat Fayege Libah. We know Hashem is hearing you! I am especially appreciative of my dear personal physician friends who were literally guiding us minute by minute, regardless of the hour. And to those who found out and came to visit bringing much joy. At one point the nurses told me there were 20 people in her room. We are praying she will return home very soon. May Hashem heal her and all those among Israel who need healing. Amen

A couple of weeks ago my dear friends Shelly and AJ Jemal called me. As I've written and said many times – I am deeply indebted to AJ who was my teacher in so many ways, who gave me everything and allowed me to take what I needed and sent me off when it was time to move on.

Shelly and AJ are working with Lirot - The Israeli Research Association for Eye Health and Blindness Prevention. The organization endeavors to increase research in the field of eye health, with the aim of locating effective treatments to eradicate diseases resulting in blindness, and to broaden public awareness of the subject of eye health. Their work helps people throughout the world.

As part of a fund raising effort, the organization is selling tickets to an off Broadway show called Not By Bread Alone at the NYU Theatre - February 2nd - Saturday night at 8:30. One of the most requested articles I wrote was on my experience in the blind restaurant in Tel Aviv. In Israel the restaurant shares space with its sister theatre group.

The play is described as follows: Eleven deaf-blind actors take the audience on a magical tour in the districts of their inner world; the world of darkness, silence and...bread. As the process of bread making unfolds on stage - the dough is being kneaded, raised and baked "for real" - a unique encounter occurs between actors and audience. Together they re-enact vivid or distant memories, recall forgotten

dreams and joyful moments and 'touch' the spark of Creation present in every one of us. The actors take the spectators into those magical moments between reality and fantasy, between grandeur and ridicule, and always eventually return to the basic meaning of bread as a symbol of our longing for a home. "Not by Bread Alone [man lives]" – the actors declare, repeatedly emphasizing the importance of their interaction with the audience and their need in human relations, which is more crucial to us all than the need for bread.

And the critics are loving it:

"An amazing performance...Thumbs up!" (Shimon Levi, 'Israel Hayom')

"A dream-like most impressive theatrical reality...it is in the power of such performance, with this unique and amazing ensemble of actors, to have again - even for a short hour, faith in man's good nature" (Shay Bar-Ya'akov, "Yediot Achronot)

"The audience comes out amazed and thrilled by the mere fact that the sky is the limit, even if you cannot actually see the sky or hear the applause that let you know that you indeed made it there" (Ruth Shiloni, Channel 2 news)

"Coming out of the show "Not by Bread Alone" I couldn't help but feel that people owe it to themselves to come and see this ensemble's performance" (Lilach Gavish, Habama)

"A theatre of dreams and hope is woven in the hands and with the humor of these 11 deaf-blind actors".

Nothing is Impossible. First in Tel Aviv, then in London, audiences rose to cheer the world's only professional deaf-blind ensemble's captivating and magical tour of their inner world. As bread is kneaded, formed and baked on stage, these extraordinary storytellers convey their memories and dreams. Transformative. Moving. Profound. Educational. Unforgettable. These are just a few of the words used to describe this once-in-a-lifetime experience that brings the theatrical and culinary arts together in an unprecedented way around one of the most fascinating human conditions mankind has ever known.

"One of the most remarkable, most humbling and most profoundly affecting theatrical experiences you will ever have." The Mail On Sunday (UK)

Directed by Nalaga'at's celebrated Artistic Director Adina Tal, Not by Bread Alone garnered tremendous acclaim in its sold-out UK premiere at the 2010 LIFT Festival, and makes its highly anticipated U.S. premiere in this strictly limited engagement.

The \$75 face value tickets are being sold for \$100 each. Please call Shelly Jemal – 917-991-3899 for tickets and more information on how you can help Livot - The Israeli Research Association for Eye Health and Blindness Prevention.

Now a bit of politics Brennan and Hagel – The president takes us on a big skip to the left for the second term. The Iranians must be singing out loud!

I found that the following from Retired Ambassador Yoram Ettinger who is one of our readers eye opening: If you would like to be added to the ambassador's weekly email list, please write him at yoramtex@netvision.net.il

The US Senate vote on the nomination of John Brennan and Chuck Hagel to the positions of CIA Director and Defense Secretary, respectively, will shape US power projection and posture of deterrence, global sanity, war on Islamic terrorism and the US determination to avert the wrath of a nuclear Iran.

John Brennan presented his position on Iran in the July, 2008 issue of The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science: "A critical step toward improved US-Iranian relations would be for US officials to cease public Iran-bashing, a tactic that may have served short-term domestic political interests, but that has heretofore been wholly counterproductive to U.S. strategic interests."

John Brennan believed that Iran halted its nuclear-weapons program in 2003, as reported by the 2007 U.S. National Intelligence Estimate report. He criticized President Bush for refusing to ease the pressure on Iran. Brennan opined that "preventing Iran from making a nuclear weapon could only be achieved through persuasion."

On August 6, 2009, John Brennan presented his worldview on countering-terrorism in a speech on "A New Approach to Safeguarding Americans" at the Center for Strategic and International Studies: "The President does not describe this [war on Islamic terrorism] as a 'war on terrorism.' That is because 'terrorism' is but a tactic.... The President does not describe this as a 'global war....' It plays into the misleading and dangerous notion that the U.S. is somehow in conflict with the rest of the world.... Nor

does President Obama see this challenge as a fight against 'Jihadists.' Describing terrorists in this way—using a legitimate term, "Jihad," meaning to purify oneself or to wage a holy struggle for a moral goal—risks giving these murderers the religious legitimacy they desperately seek...."

Brennan's ideological ambiguity/confusion towards Islamic terrorism – and his misrepresentation of Jihad and ignoring the dominance of hate education in the Muslim Middle East – could be transformed into operational ambiguity/confusion in the battle against Islamic terrorism.

At the beginning of President Clinton's 2nd term, Senator Shelby placed a "hold" on the nomination of Anthony Lake, then the National Security Advisor, to head the CIA. Senator Shelby succeeded to block the nomination, contending that Lake was an ideologue, while a CIA Director should excel in management and operations.

According to the December 19, Washington Post editorial, John Brennan and Chuck Hagel approach Iran in a similar manner: "Mr. Hagel's stated positions on critical issues, ranging from defense spending to Iran, fall well to the left of those pursued by Mr. Obama during his first term — and place him near the fringe of the Senate that would be asked to confirm him.... Mr. Hagel was similarly isolated in his views about Iran during his time in the Senate. He repeatedly voted against sanctions, opposing even those aimed at the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, which at the time was orchestrating devastating bomb attacks against U.S. troops in Iraq. Mr. Hagel argued that direct negotiations, rather than sanctions, were the best means to alter Iran's behavior."

Chuck Hagel serves as a Co-Chairman of the Presidential Intelligence Advisory Board and a Senior Director of the US/Middle East Project, promoting his worldview at-large and on the Middle East in particular.

Hagel considers the Palestinian issue to be the core cause of Middle East turbulence, a root cause of anti-US Islamic terrorism and the crown jewel of Arab policy makers, irrespective of the seismic, stormy Arab Winter, which has erupted independent of the Palestinian issue, refuting such oversimplified and misleading assumptions.

Senator Hagel was – along with Senator Kerry – one of the few supporters of Hafiz and Bashar Assad on Capitol Hill. In October, 2009, Hagel stated: "I believe there is a real possibility of a shift in Syria's strategic thinking and policies.... If we can convince

Damascus to pause and re-consider its positions and support regarding Iran, Hezbollah, Hamas and radical Palestinian groups, we will have made progress for the entire Middle East, Israel, and the U.S. Syria wants to talk – at the highest levels – and everything is on the table.... The next bi-lateral peace treaty for Israel is with Syria.”

As the Chairman of the Atlantic Council, Hagel has subscribed to the centrality of the UN – which is not the home court of US interests - in the conduct of international relations. He does not believe in US exceptionalism in the international arena and espouses the superiority of multilateralism over unilateral independent US national security actions. Both Brennan and Hagel are out of the American mainstream on crucial national security issues. What does that portend for global stability and the US national security?

Hopefully we'll be back up to writing next week

Shabbat Shalom

David Bibi

Summary of The Weekly Torah Reading:

1st Aliya: The year is 2448 and Moshe had unsuccessfully confronted Pharaoh. The situation had gotten worse, not better, and Hashem (G-d) reassured Moshe that in fact the redemption was about to begin. The 4 statements of redemption are stated for which we have the 4 cups of wine at the Passover Seder.

2nd & 3rd Aliyot: Moshe's Yichus (lineage) is established. He is 80 years old and Aharon is 83.

4th Aliya: Moshe performed the miracle of the "staff turning to a serpent" and performed the first and second plagues.

5th Aliya: Moshe performed the third plague and forewarned Pharaoh about the fourth.

6th Aliya: The fourth, fifth, and sixth plagues were performed, and Moshe forewarned Pharaoh regarding the seventh.

7th Aliya: The seventh plague was performed and Pharaoh "hardens his heart" and refused to let the Jews go.

This week's Haftorah is from Yishayah Chap. 66 and reflects the fact that today is also Rosh Chodesh. Yishayah describes the ultimate downfall of all our enemies during the war of Gog and Magog. The Navi explains that this world is the manifestation of G-d's presence and glory. Yet, we are incapable and sometimes unwilling to properly recognize G-d's manifest presence. Even when the Bais Hamikdash stood the Bnai Yisroel did not appreciate their opportunity to be close to G-d and serve Him. The Navi forewarns that insincere expressions of devotion are tantamount to offering blemished sacrifices and G-d will punish those who lack sincerity and devotion.

Nevertheless, the institution of the Bais Hamikdash and prayer are our only means for communication love and devotion. Therefore, those who truly mourn for the absence of the Bais Hamikdash and the Temple services will also merit to rejoice in her redemption and reconstruction. When the Bais Hamikdash will be rebuilt the nation will again be able to witness the Rosh Chodesh offering and service, and fully participate in expressing their commitment

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

So they did: Aharon stretched out his hand with his staff and struck the dust of the land.” (Shemot 8:13)

The Torah tells us that the first three plagues were introduced by Aharon and not Moshe. Rashi explains that Moshe didn't hit the Nile to turn it into blood or to bring out the frogs. Moshe couldn't hit the Nile because he felt gratitude to the Nile that protected him when he was placed there as an infant. The reason Aharon hit the ground to bring forth the plague of lice is because Moshe felt a debt of gratitude to the dust. Years ago, Moshe killed an Egyptian and the ground cooperated with Moshe by hiding the body of the Egyptian.

The last one is hard to understand because Moshe didn't really benefit. Actually, Datan and Abiram witnessed the killing. They informed on him to Pharaoh, who would have killed Moshe if not for a miracle that saved his life. If so, why did he feel gratitude? Practically speaking, the ground did nothing for him.

One commentator on the Midrash (Shemot Rabbah 10:7) suggests that the ground provided Moshe temporary peace of mind by allowing him to think for at least one day that his killing would go unnoticed.

Rabbi Ozer Alport suggests another answer. The Torah is teaching us a lesson of life. If we give of our precious time and energy in an earnest attempt to help somebody out, only to have our efforts fail, the average person will tell us, "Thanks, but no thanks." This expression indicates that he owes us no debt of gratitude and not so subtly suggests that next time we should just mind our own business. The Torah teaches us that because the ground was willing to help and tried to be of assistance, Moshe was obligated to show his appreciation for its good-faith efforts. Therefore Moshe was unable to strike it to bring about the plague of lice.

So many times a relative, a co-worker, or a shadchan will volunteer to try to help out. Unfortunately these efforts don't always lead to the results we were hoping for. The next time it happens, instead of rubbing in the failure when somebody already feels bad enough, let us remember the lesson of Moshe and the ground and express our sincere appreciation for his or her time and good intentions. Rabbi Reuven Semah

"Go to Pharaoh in the morning, behold he is going to the water." (Shemot 7:15)

Rashi tells us that Pharaoh would rise very early each morning to relieve himself in the Nile so that people would think he is a G-d and doesn't use the facilities all day long. Imagine the discomfort he had all day just so he could make an impression! Remember the '60's when people would drive in the sweltering heat without air-conditioning and still have the windows closed so that others thought they had? Of course, this is absurd; we would never do such a thing!

So how come we still make affairs that we can't afford? Why do we put ourselves in debt just so others can comment on our occasions? People always ask, why can't the Rabbis do something? Let's have guidelines for our own benefit. But will everyone listen? Will someone be the first to show that we don't have to impress others and fall behind in our payments to people we owe!

If we read about Pharaoh and say how silly to be uncomfortable just for appearances, shouldn't we take the lesson to heart and really do something about it? Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

PAIN AND GAIN

It pays to travel. It is not only the different people we meet, or the beautiful or historic places we visit, that make travel so beneficial. It is the fact that when we return home to the good old U.S. of A., we

realize that we really have the best standard of living on the planet. Cell phones, pocket computers, hi-tech appliances, and leisure activities all enhance the life of an average American. It's really great, isn't it?

Well, history gives us warning. Most of the extinct civilizations of history – the Ancient Egyptians, the Romans, the Greeks – developed great societies and produced a living standard that outdid their contemporaries. In the period it took to rise from oblivion to fame, great effort and even some suffering were expended in order to achieve greatness. However, in each case, once the society became comfortable, the decline in effort, morals, and success began. The soft, easy life eventually led to the culture's downfall.

There's a lesson to be learned from this repetitious and historical social phenomenon. When you are feeling smug, don't get comfortable in the glow of what you have already achieved. Push yourself to an uncomfortable exertion of effort towards even higher levels of achievement. (One Minute With Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

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MishnaBerura.com, LearnTorah.com**

Maintaining Idealism

In Parashat Vaera the Torah traces the lineage of Moshe and Aharon, listing the sons and descendants of Levi through Moshe and Aharon. The Torah concludes this section by saying, "This is Aharon and Moshe to whom G-d said, 'Bring Beneh Yisrael from the land of Egypt... They are the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt... This is Moshe and Aharon' (Shemot 6:26-27).

The obvious question arises, why did the Torah have to emphasize – twice – that "this is Aharon and Moshe"? Moshe and Aharon have already been introduced, and we have been reading about them in the stories told thus far in the Book of Shemot. What is the Torah's intent in stressing that "this is Aharon and Moshe" and "this is Moshe and Aharon"?

Rav Mordechai Gifter (1915-2001) explained that the Torah here refers to Moshe and Aharon's consistent mindset and motives throughout the entire process of the Exodus. Too often, people who involve themselves in noble and important causes gradually lose their idealism as time passes and complex issues arise. As committees are formed and people must sit and work together to achieve the desired results, the egos often take over, and eventually the committee members act to promote themselves

rather than the idealistic cause for which they initially joined the project. The initial rush of idealism subsides and gives way to personal agendas and selfish goals. And in the end, what had begun as a noble, altruistic endeavor degenerates into a battle of egos and clash of personal interests.

The Torah therefore emphasizes that “this is Aharon and Moshe” who first went to Pharaoh, and “this is Moshe and Aharon” even later in the process. All throughout, their motives and intentions remained consistent. Their desire was to lead Beneh Yisrael to redemption, and was not tainted by the quest for grandeur and self-promotion. Their involvement in this undertaking began idealistic, remained idealistic, and ended idealistic.

The Torah thus teaches us to keep a proper perspective throughout the noble projects in which we involve ourselves, not to lose sight of the higher purpose for which we committed ourselves to those causes in the first place. The spirit of idealism and “Le’Shem Shamayim” (“for the sake of Heaven”) that drives us to take on important projects should continue fueling us throughout the long, and often difficult, process. It must always be about our higher ideals, and never about just ourselves.

Rabbi Wein

Pharaoh and Egypt sustain a slew of plagues and misfortunes as they are vividly recorded in this week’s parsha. There are those among the Egyptian leadership who waver and realize that Egypt is lost if it does not allow the Jews to be freed from slavery and to leave Egypt. But Pharaoh is still not convinced. His heart is not only hardened but it is unalterably predisposed to refuse the requests of Moshe.

The Talmud teaches us that “even when standing at the gates of Hell, wicked people will remain unrepentant.” Admitting error, changing one’s predisposition on important matters, and reversing course – these are very difficult challenges for people to deal with. Our ego gets in the way of our sense of reality. It prevents us from dealing wisely and practically with circumstances as they are now, not as they once were, nor as what we wish them to be.

Power always brings with it an inflation of ego. Pharaoh cannot change course because doing so would deflate his ego and weaken his perceived power base. His strength, his power, is really his ultimate weakness. The great Pharaoh cannot admit his past mistakes for then he would no longer feel himself to be the great Pharaoh.

He is the victim of his own position and the power that comes with it. Ordinary people, even his own advisors, can admit to error and change course and policies. Not so the great Pharaoh, who deems himself to be a god and above all other humans in his realm. The more arrogant and prideful a person is, the less likely it is that he or she will allow reality to alter preconceived ideas and policies. Pharaoh is trapped in the web of his own making.

Moshe’s observation of the folly of Pharaoh and of his personality flaw constitutes a great personal lesson and plays a significant part in the development of Moshe as the greatest teacher and leader of Israel. Witnessing Pharaoh’s arrogance and display of egocentric behavior drives Moshe to become the exact opposite type of person – the most humble of all human beings.

The Torah records for us instances when Moshe admits error and reverses decisions previously enunciated. Moshe’s humility is legendary and his sense of real and practical judgment, of circumstances and of the Jewish people for good or for better, is the hallmark of his leadership of Israel for the next forty years. Once ego is tempered and dealt with, true personal growth and concern for national welfare will undoubtedly follow.

The contrast between Pharaoh and Moshe can therefore not be any clearer. Unlikely as it may sound, the meek and modest will in the long run always triumph over the arrogant and prideful. This is a life lesson that the Torah and Judaism impart to us in a repetitive fashion. We all should learn from Pharaoh’s faulty personality and behavior. And we should all certainly attempt to emulate the character and nobility of the trait of modesty and humility as exhibited by our great teacher and leader, Moshe

Sir Jonathan Sacks
Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations
of the Commonwealth

Of Lice and Men

Throughout all Egypt the dust turned into lice. But when the magicians tried to produce lice by their secret arts, they could not. The lice attacked men and animals alike. The magicians said to Pharaoh, ‘This is the finger of G-d.’ But Pharaoh’s heart was hard and he would not listen. (Ex. 8:13-15)

Too little attention has been paid to the use of humour in the Torah. Its most important form is the

use of satire to mock the pretensions of human beings who think they can emulate G-d. One thing makes G-d laugh – the sight of humanity attempting to defy heaven:

The kings of the earth take their stand,
And the rulers gather together against the Lord and
His anointed one.
“Let us break our chains,” they say,
“and throw off their fetters.”
He who sits in heaven laughs,
G-d scoffs at them. (Psalm 2: 2-4)

There is a marvellous example in the story of the Tower of Babel. The people in the plain of Shinar decide to build a city with a tower that “will reach heaven.” This is an act of defiance against the divinely given order of nature (“The heavens are the heavens of G-d: the earth He has given to the children of men”). The Torah then says, “But G-d came down to see the city and the tower . . .” Down on earth, the builders thought their tower would reach heaven. From the vantage point of heaven, however, it was so miniscule that G-d had to “come down” to see it.

Satire is essential to understanding at least some of the plagues. The Egyptians worshipped a multiplicity of gods, most of whom represented forces of nature. By their “secret arts” the magicians believed that they could control these forces. Magic is the equivalent in an era of myth to technology in an age of science. A civilization that believes it can manipulate the gods, believes likewise that it can exercise coercion over human beings. In such a culture, the concept of freedom is unknown.

The plagues were not merely intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed (“I will perform acts of judgement against all the gods of Egypt: I am G-d”, Ex. 12:12). This explains the first and last of the nine plagues prior to the killing of the firstborn. The first involved the Nile. The ninth was the plague of darkness. The Nile was worshipped as the source of fertility in an otherwise desert region. The sun was seen as the greatest of the gods, Re, whose child Pharaoh was considered to be. Darkness meant the eclipse of the sun, showing that even the greatest of the Egyptian gods could do nothing in the face of the true G-d.

What is at stake in this confrontation is the difference between myth – in which the gods are mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated – and biblical monotheism in which ethics (justice, compassion,

human dignity) constitute the meeting-point of G-d and mankind. That is the key to the first two plagues, both of which refer back to the beginning of Egyptian persecution of the Israelites: the killing of male children at birth, first through the midwives (though, thanks to Shifra and Puah’s moral sense, this was foiled) then by throwing them into the Nile to drown. That is why, in the first plague, the river waters turn to blood. The significance of the second, frogs, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Heqt, the frog-goddess, represented the midwife who assisted women in labour. Both plagues are coded messages meaning: “If you use the river and midwives – both normally associated with life – to bring about death, those same forces will turn against you.” An immensely significant message is taking shape: Reality has an ethical structure. If used for evil ends, the powers of nature will turn against man, so that what he does will be done to him in turn. There is justice in history.

The response of the Egyptians to these first two plagues is to see them within their own frame of reference. Plagues, for them, are forms of magic, not miracles. To Pharaoh’s “magicians”, Moses and Aaron are people like themselves who practice “secret arts”. So they replicate them: they show that they too can turn water into blood and generate a horde of frogs. The irony here is very close to the surface. So intent are the Egyptian magicians on proving that they can do what Moses and Aaron have done, that they entirely fail to realise that far from making matters better for the Egyptians, they are making them worse: more blood, more frogs.

This brings us to the third plague, lice. One of the purposes of this plague is to produce an effect which the magicians cannot replicate. They try. They fail. Immediately they conclude, “This is the finger of G-d”.

This is the first appearance in the Torah of an idea, surprisingly persistent in religious thinking even today, called “the god of the gaps”. This holds that a miracle is something for which we cannot yet find a scientific explanation. Science is natural; religion is supernatural. An “act of G-d” is something we cannot account for rationally. What magicians (or technocrats) cannot reproduce must be the result of Divine intervention. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that religion and science are opposed. The more we can explain scientifically or control technologically, the less need we have for faith. As the scope of science expands, the place of G-d progressively diminishes to vanishing point.

What the Torah is intimating is that this is a pagan mode of thought, not a Jewish one. The Egyptians

admitted that Moses and Aaron were genuine prophets when they performed wonders beyond the scope of their own magic. But this is not why we believe in Moses and Aaron. On this, Maimonides is unequivocal:

Israel did not believe in Moses our teacher because of the signs he performed. When faith is predicated on signs, a lurking doubt always remains that these signs may have been performed with the aid of occult arts and witchcraft. All the signs Moses performed in the wilderness, he did because they were necessary, not to authenticate his status as a prophet . . . When we needed food, he brought down manna. When the people were thirsty, he cleaved the rock. When Korach's supporters denied his authority, the earth swallowed them up. So too with all the other signs. What then were our grounds for believing in him? The revelation at Sinai, in which we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears . . . (Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah 8:1).

The primary way in which we encounter G-d is not through miracles but through His word – the revelation – Torah – which is the Jewish people's constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of G-d. To be sure, G-d is in the events which, seeming to defy nature, we call miracles. But He is also in nature itself. Science does not displace G-d: it reveals, in ever more intricate and wondrous ways, the design within nature itself. Far from diminishing our religious sense, science (rightly understood) should enlarge it, teaching us to see "How great are Your works, O G-d; You have made them all with wisdom." Above all, G-d is to be found in the voice heard at Sinai, teaching us how to construct a society that will be the opposite of Egypt: in which the few do not enslave the many, nor are strangers mistreated.

The best argument against the world of ancient Egypt was Divine humour. The cultic priests and magicians who thought they could control the sun and the Nile discovered that they could not even produce a louse. Pharaohs like Ramses II demonstrated their godlike status by creating monumental architecture: the great temples, palaces and pyramids whose immensity seemed to betoken divine grandeur (the Gemara explains that Egyptian magic could not function on very small things). G-d mocks them by revealing His presence in the tiniest of creatures (T. S. Eliot: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust").

What the Egyptian magicians (and their latter-day successors) did not understand is that power over nature is not an end in itself but solely the means to ethical ends. The lice were G-d's joke at the expense of the magicians who believed that because they controlled the forces of nature, they were the masters of human destiny. They were wrong. Faith is not merely belief in the supernatural. It is the ability to hear the call of the Author of Being, to be free in such a way as to respect the freedom and dignity of others.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

"And there was a hail, and fire flashing amidst the hail...that nothing similar had ever been seen since Egypt became a nation". (9:24)

We must be aware that each one of the Ten Plagues was intended for the purpose that "You should know that I am Hashem" (10:2). But for this it was necessary also to discredit all the false gods, as was said at the final Plagues, "And upon all the gods of Egypt I shall do judgments" (12:12). Each Plague was an attack on some idol's efficacy.

This hail was not merely ice but also stones, heated by the great fire among them. Thus this hail was unique not only in Egypt's history but also in the history of nations. For the uniqueness was not merely in the size of the hailstones and in the intensity and duration of the hail, but unequalled in the fact that these were very hot pellets of solid stone. Falling from the heights, the heated stones acquired a great velocity so that each stone became a deadly missile that destroyed whatever it struck.

The entire land became a conflagration (9:23), and Pharaoh's advisers declared that Egypt was lost (10:7). "Trees are ruined. No fruits, no vegetables are to be found. Grain has perished everywhere. The land is desolated. Gates and columns and walls are consumed by fire." (from the Ipuwer Papyrus, composed by an Egyptian sage who described these events)

"Only in the land of Goshen where were the Sons of Israel there was no hail" (9:26). Thus it was demonstrated not only that the hail came from G-d but also that it came from the G-d of Israel. Quoted from "A NATION IS BORN" by Rabbi Miller ZT'L