

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VA'ERA

Please take a moment to say a chapter of Tehilim for
Faygeh Libah Bat Aidel - As she is having surgery this afternoon

January 16-17, 2015 26 TEBET 5775

Rosh Hodesh Shebat will be celebrated on Wednesday, January 21.

Please welcome Rabbi David Azerad this Shabbat. Rabbi Azerad will be reading the Torah for us this week and next week B'H. If we are lucky, we will hear him as Chazan as he knows different maquamim. Rabbi Azerad is a teacher and perhaps will also share with us some Torah thoughts. He, his wife and baby are staying by Robert and Avital and we thank them as always for their hospitality. We thank the community members who have invited the family for meals.

DEDICATIONS: In memory of Sarah Bat Esther – Sara Cain 25 Tebet

Candle lighting Friday evening January 10 at 4:35 p.m. Mincha at 4:35

SHABBAT: Perasha class with Rabbi Aharon at 8:30AM this week
Shaharit - Hashem Melech at 9:00 AM - Please say Shema at home by 8:57AM

Kiddush has no sponsor this week – we need sponsors

Kiddush before 12:05 Hasot

NEXT WEEK IS RABBI ABITTAN'S Z'SL, NINTH YAHRZEIT SHABBAT

Please plan to join us and the entire Abittan family for a special Shabbat and Kiddush

Please sponsor a Kiddush or Seudah Shelishi or breakfast in memory or in honor of a loved one
Early Mincha after Kiddush - Begin at 12:10 and Amidah after 12:29

Shabbat Morning Children's Program 10:30 - 11:30 with Jennifer
Ages 0-5 - in the Playroom/ Girls Ages 6-12 - In the Upstairs Library / Treats, Games, Stories, Prayers and Fun!

Children's afternoon program with the Bach at the Sephardic 3:00 PM
January through MAY joint program will be at Sephardic – June, July, August at the Bach
Ladies Class at the Lembergers at 4:00

Return for Arbit at 5:45 and then following ARBIT

MOVIE NIGHT WILL RESUME ON JANUARY 31st

Bring your friends for pizza, fun, raffles and prizes for the winners of our weekly 613 mitzvot contests!

DATES: 01/31/15, 02/07/15, 02/21/15, 03/07/15

Mazal Tov to Vivien and Richard Lobel who announce:

We are B'H celebrating Daniel and Kylie's engagement on Sunday 25 Jan 2015
All are invited to this "open house" celebration, from 3-6, at Temple Zion in the West End
The Synagogue is located at 62 Maryland st corner of West Beech Street.

WEEKDAY TEFILLA SCHEDULE

Shaharit Sunday 8:00AM, Mon and Thurs at 6:55, Tues, Weds and Fri at 7:00

Krav Maga returns in February

SUNDAY MORNING FEBRUARY 1st – we will have a special breakfast and class
On TU BISHVAT

We will enjoy all the fruits and nuts associated with the holiday and learn its special meaning
Please join us Yefilah at 8AM, Breakfast and class at 9AM

Tuesday February 3rd – Please join Rabbi David at the Areyat of his father Joe R. Bibi A'H at
Ahi Ezer , 1885 Ocean Parkway and Avenue S, in Brooklyn – Mincha apx 5PM followed by Arbit and some
divrei Torah at 5:45 followed by Tu Bishvat Berachot

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**Daily Minyan Mon – Thurs at 979 Third Avenue,
 17th Floor, Artistic Frame at 4PM – Please join us!
 212-289-2100 – Mincha and Arbit – Give us 22
 minutes and we'll give you the World To Come!**

Editors Notes

Its Wednesday as I write this. I arrived in Florida on Monday to spend time with my mom and although I came to be menachem avel, we've had an amazing bonding experience the past two days for which I am deeply grateful. We spend our entire lives pressured by tasks and schedules and the need to respond to every email and text, we don't get to really speak with each other. To sit for three hours at breakfast and two hours for dinner and just hear stories and life lessons is a gift.

I am also grateful for the Porto Vita minyan. What a pleasure to be five minutes from the Synagogue. We have been praying there each morning and I am thankful that after prayers we have time each morning for a class. When I repeated this morning's class to my mom, she suggested that I write about it.

We mentioned this morning that one of the themes of this week and last week is the concept of hakarat hatov – recognizing and appreciating the good. And the lesson comes in a most unusual manner. We read this week of the first seven plagues. We are all familiar with them, especially the first three. Moses is told to strike the river and the water turns to blood. In fact all water throughout Egypt turns to blood. The second plague again requires a strike to the river resulting in an invasion of frogs. The third plague requires Moses to strike the ground and from the dust, lice rise and swarm the land of Egypt. In all three cases though, Moses does not strike the water or earth. He passes the task to his brother Aaron and we are told why. Moses as a baby was placed into a basket and laid at the reeds of the Nile where he was discovered by the woman who would become his stepmother, Batya the daughter of Pharaoh. The Nile in some way protected Moses and Moses would not strike the water which he was thankful for. In the same vein, Moses last week strikes and kills the Egyptian who was beating a Hebrew slave, He is able to hide the body in the sand. Moses again is unable to strike the sand which assisted him.

I asked that we consider for a moment and contrast the behavior of Moses with the behavior of Pharaoh. Last week we read of a new king who didn't remember Joseph. One finds this very difficult. This new king seems to come to power sometime following the death of Joseph and the birth of Moses. This was a period of only 50 years. SO how could he possibly not know of the man who ruled Egypt for 80 years? How could he not know of the man who saved Egypt and made Egypt the wealthiest nation in the world? How could he not know of the man who transferred all the land in the country to the royal treasury, making every citizen no more than a serf?

In Hebrew, we use the same word to thank and to admit. When one thanks another, he in essence admits that he needs that other person. Too often we don't thank because we don't want to admit that we were lacking something that another provided. We don't want to be in a position of owing. Pharaoh as all powerful needed to wipe Joseph from memory, because remembering Joseph would have required that Pharaoh show Hakarat Hatov – a recognition of the good. It would have required Pharaoh to thank, appreciate and admit and that was too much for a ruler who likened himself as a god.

Moses on the other hand teaches us how important it is to appreciate and thank by having Hakarat Hatov for inanimate objects which obviously have no feelings.

When one of the gentleman mentioned that it was strange to use in inanimate object as an example, I reminded him that this is exactly what we do each Shabbat. I asked why we cover the Challah, why do we cover the bread when we make Kiddush on Friday night and Shabbat? Halacha has an order to blessing based on importance and bread is more important in that hierarchy than wine. So since we will be making Kiddush on wine, we cover the bread so as not to embarrass the bread. We do this week in and week out, year after year. But what's the real lesson here.

Rabbi Abittan would tell the following story about Rabbi Yisroel Salanter: Rabbi Yisroel was once stranded in Kovno for Shabbat. Everyone wanted to host him, but he chose to spend the Shabbat at the home of a baker who had no children to feed, so he would not take away anyone's portion of food. The baker was an observant Jew but hardly a man of intelligence. As he ushered his esteemed guest into his house, he shouted at his wife, "Why are the challahs not covered? How many times must I remind you to cover the challahs?"

The poor woman, recognizing her distinguished guest, hurried to cover the challahs with tears in her eyes. When the baker asked Rabbi Yisroel to do the honors by reciting the Kiddush, the Rabbi first asked him, "Can you tell me why we cover the challahs?" "Of course," replied the baker. "Every child knows the answer. When there are many different foods on the table, the first blessing is always made over the bread, after which no other blessing need be made. On Friday night, however, the first blessing has to be made over the wine. In order not to shame the challah, who expects the blessing to be made over her, we must cover her over until after the sanctification of the wine."

Rabbi Yisroel looked at the baker incredulously. "Why do your ears not hear what your mouth is saying?" he asked. "Do you think that our Jewish tradition does not understand that a piece of dough has no feelings and would never become embarrassed? Understand that our laws are trying to sensitize us to the feelings of human beings, our friends, our neighbors, and especially our wives!"

What a contrast Moses to Pharaoh? What a lesson to all of us.

I chose this subject for the class this morning as today was the Yahrzeit of two great men for who we as a community should have Hakarat HaTov. My own great uncle Dave Bibi who was truly one of the outstanding men and builders of our community and we all owe him a tremendous debt of gratitude. And two years ago today marked the passing of my father's dear friend Rabbi Abraham B Hecht who faithfully served our community for six decades from young Magen David on 67th Street to his Sabbath sermons in the dome at Shaare Zion. (See an article about the rabbi from the Synagogue web site below.) We should be thankful to them and all who came before us and aided in the building of our beautiful community.

And if I can give one more shout out. I prayed with Mr. Sol Betesh the past two days. All of us in the community know that when we have a misvah – our word for a funeral, the service typically takes place in the Magen David on 67th Street, Over the years, the building which received landmark status fell into terrible disrepair. It was bad enough that we were there to mourn the passing of a friend or relative, but doing so among the chipped paint and crumbling walls, sitting on splintered benches with flickering lights was disrespectful to the niftar – the departed and to the mourners. Sol Betesh did an amazing job in bringing dignity and respect back to the building.

We all owe him and all those who worked with him and tremendous thank you.

Finally, Nathan Dweck in his weekly email reminded all of us that as we begin Yeshiva week vacations to be on guard for each opportunity to make a Kiddush Hashem, a sanctification of Hashem's name. Each time we smile and say thank you and teach our kids by example to do the same we emulate the behavior of Moses our teacher.

Enjoy, be safe and be thankful ... wherever you find yourself this week. Shabbat Shalom,
Rabbi David Bibi

Paris Attacks Revive Israelis' Fears By Daniel Gordis

The horrors that unfolded in Paris and its outskirts last week captivated Israel no less than any other Western country, but they have played differently in the Jewish State, which knows well what it is like to have cities turned into war zones. In Israel, chilling scenes like the blood-soaked floor of the Charlie Hebdo offices unfold far too often, as they did most recently in a Jerusalem synagogue. The Charlie Hebdo attack and the hostage scene in the kosher market did more than evoke recent Israeli memories. Far more poignantly, they brought images of the Holocaust to Israelis' minds. The image of frightened European Jews hiding in a freezer was for many Israelis a haunting reminder of Jews hiding from Nazis, as were images of parents holding young children and fleeing for their lives. (Israel's press also went to great lengths to praise the young Muslim man who protected some of the patrons of the Hyper Cacher supermarket; Israeli newspapers plastered his photograph across their front pages.) The massacre in the Charlie Hebdo offices had Holocaust echoes, too. Georges Wolinski, the 80-year-old Charlie Hebdo cartoonist, was born to a Polish Jewish father who had fled to Tunisia to escape the Nazis. In 1936, Siegfried Wolinski was killed in Tunisia, and his family left for Paris. Georges, Siegfried's son, was killed by Muslim extremists in Paris last week. Such moments afford an ironic sense of confirmation for the Jewish State; modern political Zionism was born of a Jewish consensus that Europe was a bloodbath just waiting to happen. Even bitter political rivals such as Ze'ev Jabotinsky (father of Revisionist Zionism and mentor to Menachem Begin) and David Ben-Gurion (Israel's first prime minister and a leader of Labor Zionism), who detested each other and disagreed about most everything, agreed that Jewish life in Europe was doomed and that the only answer was a state.

The events in Paris seemed to confirm again their prediction. The rate of Jewish immigration from France to Israel had already doubled to 7,000 in 2014, making France Israel's largest source of immigrants. That rate is expected to rise to about 10,000 immigrants in 2015. In the aftermath of the attacks, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel called for French Jews to come to Israel en masse, while France's prime minister, Manuel Valls -- apparently taking seriously the possibility of mass Jewish emigration -- said if 100,000 French Jews were to depart, France would no longer be France. The burial of the four Jewish victims of the supermarket attack in Israel, and not in France, held symbolism that was lost on no one; in moments of crisis, Israel goes to great pains to remind the world that Jews have only one true home. Whatever validation Israelis might have gleaned from the horrors, however, was short-lived. Although the image of Netanyahu walking arm-in-arm with other world leaders in Paris suggested an easing of Israel's pariah status in France, a darker back-story soon emerged. The French had asked Netanyahu not to come because they did not wish to highlight the Israeli-Palestinian conflict during the march. When he insisted on attending, Netanyahu was told that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas (who is not technically a head of a state) would be invited and would also be in the front row. Netanyahu and President Francois Hollande of France attended a ceremony in Paris's Grand Synagogue after the march, but when Israel's prime minister got up to speak, the French president walked out. And even as hundreds of people were attending the funeral of one of the supermarket victims, Israel's Foreign Ministry released a report predicting that Israel's international standing would plummet further in 2015. Europe would extend its boycotts of Israeli products, the Foreign Ministry said, and after Israel's elections, the U.S. might not use its veto in the UN's Security Council on Israel's behalf. A week that began with horrific images of Jewish vulnerability allowed Israelis to believe, however fleetingly, that the necessity of a Jewish State was obvious to all. By the end of the week, though, the press was calling Netanyahu's visit to Paris a public-relations disaster, and even Israel's government was predicting that Israel's standing would only worsen. It was a week, some Israelis muttered, that demonstrated with regard to both Netanyahu and Europe that plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.

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.

Yechezkel 28:25 -The theme of the Exodus is the Jew and the Egyptian recognizing G-d's absolute mastery over all things. The nature of a slave / master relationship is for the slave to be dependent on the master and the master to feel a proprietorship over the slave. At the time of the Exodus, Pharaoh had to be humbled, the Jews had to be freed of their dependency upon Egypt, and the Jews would have to direct their fealty to G-d, and G-d alone.

Egypt retained her position as a major world power into the era of the first Bais Hamikdash (Temple). It would be Babylon that would humble Egypt and strip her of her position as a major international power.

Yechezkel, the Navi, prophesied the downfall of Egypt around the year 3332 - 429 b.c.e. He compared Egypt to a great sea monster that dominated the sea. The fisherman caught the sea monster along with all the other fish that clung to the defeated monster, and dragged them into the wilderness to rot and become food for the beasts of the field and the birds of the sky. So too, the same would happen to Egypt and the Bnai Yisroel who had formed an unholy alliance with Egypt against the might of Babylon. Nevuchadnetzar would eventually destroy Egypt along with Israel who had clung to Egypt for protection. In order for the Jew to be truly free of all-foreign domination and oppression he would have to accept his dependency upon G-d, and G-d alone.

EXCERPTS FROM THE JERSEY SHORE TORAH BULLETIN

"I shall take you to Me for a people."(Shemot 6:7)

Our perashah contains the verses that have the four different expressions that represent the progressive stages of redemption. These four stages are the basis for the Rabbinic requirement of the four cups at the Pesah Seder. The fourth one, "I shall take you," means that Hashem took the Jews as His people when He gave them the Torah at Sinai. This was the climax, the purpose of the Exodus.

Rabbi Shmuel Birnbaum zt"l, the great Rosh Yeshivah of the Mirrer Yeshivah in Brooklyn, asks an incisive question. The phrase, "I shall take you as a nation," is phrased in the future tense. It implies that when the Exodus comes we will become His nation. It implies that up until that point we were not His nation. However, this is problematic, because we find many references that the Jewish people are His nation before the redemption. For example, at the burning bush, Hashem says, "I see the suffering of My nation" (3:7).

The Rabbi explains with a parable. At times we see, G-d forbid, children born with severe physical or mental problems. These problems demand constant care for the rest of their lives. If a Heavenly voice would come out saying that it was decided to send to earth such a baby, how many people would volunteer to take that child? Once the Rosh Yeshivah was talking to one of his students who had such a child, and the Rabbi was trying to give him encouragement to carry on. The student answered that he was fine, he completely accepts Hashem's judgment with love. But, the Rabbi asks, how many people would request to have such a child? Not too many great people like this are around.

This is exactly what happened in Egypt. The Jews had sunken to such a low level of spirituality that the tree that Abraham planted, the nation he founded, almost was uprooted at that point. It's almost as if Hashem was "stuck" with us. Abraham founded the nation and Hashem so to speak had no choice but to keep us. Maybe given a choice Hashem would not have opted to take us.

To this Hashem says no! "I shall take you for a nation" despite all of the nation's shortcomings. Hashem closes his eyes to all of this. Hashem doesn't just settle for us. At the time of the Exodus, He will elevate the Jews until they will be worthy to be called G-d's nation. It will not be just a continuation of the planting of Abraham; it will be a new planting, His first choice. We hope to see this same uplifting of the Jewish people at the final redemption, Amen.
Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Reuven Semah

"And they did not heed Moshe because of shortness of breath and hard work" (Shemot 6:9)

The Jewish people were not able to listen to Moshe because of the hard work that the Egyptians imposed on them. Indeed, this was the ultimate goal of Pharaoh, that the Jews not listen to any words of hope, by putting on them a staggering workload. The Mesilat Yesharim (chapter 2) tells us that this is the favorite strategy of the Yeser Hara, Evil Inclination. He makes us very busy with many responsibilities so that we will be distracted from our true life goals. If we would spend a little time in contemplating our actions and reflecting on our way of life, we would have second thoughts as to our conduct and we would find a way to better ourselves in any way we could. So the Evil Inclination finds more distractions and more headaches to keep our focus off of what's really important in life.

Let's set aside some time to reflect and contemplate. While in the car or going to work by bus or train, let's leave off all radios and tape decks for a few minutes each day and think about our priorities and values. Or we can use the time at home when all is quiet or right before we go to bed! We will be amazed at how good we feel when using this time to further our spiritual growth. Shabbat Shalom. Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

RABBI ELI MANSOUR The Redeemer of Israel

Towards the beginning of Parashat Vaera we read God's command to Moshe to convey to Bene Yisrael His promise to free them from the Egyptian bondage that they had endured for over two centuries. In formulating this promise, God employs several different expressions in reference to the people's freedom, including the promise, "Ve'ga'alti Etchem" – "I shall redeem you" (6:6). The root "G.A.L." is commonly translated to mean "redeem," and is familiar to us from numerous contexts. We often speak of our anticipation of "Ge'ula" – redemption – and in our prayer service we describe the Almighty as "Ga'al Yisrael" – "He who redeemed Israel" – and as "Go'el Yisrael" – "He who redeems Israel."

But what does the term "Go'el" really mean? What is the precise definition of "Ge'ula," and to what exactly do we refer when we speak of God as the "Go'el"?

In the Book of Vayikra, the Torah presents laws relevant to a person who has come upon hard times and must sell his property or even himself in order to survive. The Torah writes that when a Jew becomes poor and must sell his land, "His redeemer who is close to him shall come and redeem the sold property of his brother" (Vayikra 25:25). Similarly, in the case

of a Jew who had to sell himself as a slave to a non-Jew, the Torah requires that "one of his brethren shall redeem him" (25:48). In this context, the Torah clearly associates the concept of "Ge'ula" – "redemption" – with kinship. A "Go'el" is somebody "who is close to him," or "one of his brethren" – meaning, a person's relative. When a person experiences hardship, his "Go'alim" – his relatives – bear the responsibility to come to his side and assist as best they can. "Ge'ula" thus refers to an expression of kinship, the devotion, loyalty, concern and commitment that family members and relatives show to one another.

This is the deeper meaning behind our reference to God as our "Go'el." It means that God looks upon us as His "relative," that He cares for and is concerned about us as a person cares for his family members.

During the period of Egyptian bondage, Bene Yisrael felt alone and abandoned. The Egyptians tortured and tormented them, and – as has always been the case, to this very day – no other nation in the world showed any concern for their plight. God therefore tells Moshe to announce to the Hebrew slaves that "Ve'ga'alti" – God will be our "Go'el," He is the relative they so desperately need to rescue them. The concept of "Go'el Yisrael" is that the Jewish people are never truly alone, no matter how isolated we often feel among the other nations of the world. We can always rely on the Almighty as our "Go'el," the relative who will come to our side when we face dire straits.

The concept of "Ge'ula" thus refers to God's immense love for and devotion to Am Yisrael. It means that He will never abandon us, and that He will one day come to our assistance and restore our sovereignty and rights to our land.

This perspective on the term "Ge'ula" should serve as a great source of encouragement during difficult times. We all face times in our lives when we feel alone, helpless or abandoned. At such periods we should remember that we are never without a "Go'el," that God is always capable and prepared to help us out. Just as He is "Ga'al Yisrael" – the One who has redeemed Israel in the past – so is He the "Go'el Yisrael" – the One who continues to support and sustain us, and who remains eternally committed to us as a relative who dedicates himself to assist his brother in crisis.

Rabbi Wein
THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

One of the tragic consequences of war is that thousands and perhaps even millions of civilians are displaced, uprooted from their homes and lives and have involuntarily acquired the unwanted distinction of becoming refugees. Yet, in most instances regarding refugees after the wars of the twentieth century, these refugees eventually found new homes and new lives – many times better homes and better lives – and were, in the main, successfully absorbed into their new societies.

This pattern happened to the survivors of the Holocaust and to the almost three quarters of a million Jewish refugees from Arab lands that immigrated to Israel in the 1940s and 1950s. However, the three quarters of a million Arabs who fled or were forced to flee from their homes because of the wars initiated by the Arab countries against the fledgling state of Israel, have never been resettled or absorbed in the surrounding Arab societies to which they fled.

They were and are kept as hostages, and as is further demanded by the Arab countries, that Israel somehow should commit certain national suicide by allowing these families – now numbering in the millions of people – to establish themselves in Israel. This cynical exploitation of human misery is par for the course in the Middle East.

The rest of the world also pays lip service to this idea, knowing that it is impractical, untenable and counterproductive to any sort of settlement and stabilization here in the Middle East. Israel may not appear on the maps of Moslem textbooks the world over but apparently there are millions of Moslems who somehow long to live there.

The United Nations, especially UNRWA, willingly is a co-conspirator in this cruel charade known as "the right of return." The Palestinians are hell-bent on declaring themselves to be a state. Yet, within the portion of the land of Israel now under their control, there are large refugee camps containing hundreds of thousands of their own Palestinian people, for whom it does little or nothing.

In the outskirts of Gaza, Jenin, Bethlehem and other Arab cities on the West Bank there are enormous refugee camps crammed with despairing and helpless people. It is in these refugee camps that terror squads are formed and bred. The Palestinian Authority, upon which the world lavishes hundreds of millions of dollars a year, keeps these people in squalor, subject to crime and hopelessness. It feeds them the line that someday – and that day is always

just around the corner – they will inhabit Haifa, Tel Aviv, Jaffa and Safed.

In order to deflect anger and violence from itself, the Palestinian Authority has indoctrinated these unfortunates with the belief that Israel is the root cause for all of their misery and troubles. There is a growing sense that these people now realize that the corruption and cruelty of their Palestinian brothers towards them is certainly the direct cause of their misery.

Because of this realization it is possible, if not even probable, that the next intifada will be against the Palestinian Authority and it will be fueled by the frustration and hopelessness bred in the refugee camps.

However, there is no doubt that the propaganda and indoctrination of the Palestinian Authority has so poisoned the minds of the Palestinian masses that Israel and the Jews remain the real enemy, worthy of destruction and annihilation. So the ultimate intifada will be against Israel solely.

Is there anything Israel can do regarding this near existential threat to its existence as represented by the Palestinian refugees? It should be clear to all that any sort of settlement with the Palestinian Authority that does not now include a blanket "right of return" will not be accepted by the Palestinian masses.

The Palestinian Authority has painted itself – and Israel with it - into a corner by trumpeting this issue for the past almost seventy years and has left itself almost no wiggle room for compromise. There is no Israeli government that can ever agree to any blanket, all-inclusive "right of return" for the generations descended from the original Palestinian refugees.

This issue has always been swept under the rug and overshadowed by territorial withdrawals, land swaps and other such cosmetic issues. The heart of the matter still lies with the status of Jerusalem and with the refugee issue. Since neither of these issues seems amenable to settlement in the foreseeable future, maintaining the status quo, tenuous and uncomfortable as it may be for both sides, seems to be the only practical option remaining.

One certainly cannot win a Nobel Peace Prize for maintaining the status quo. Nevertheless, the status quo may be the only viable policy extant within the current makeup of the Middle East and Arab society.

Chief Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

Freewill

The question is ancient. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, then it was God who made Pharaoh refuse to let the Israelites go, not Pharaoh himself. How can this be just? How could it be right to punish Pharaoh and his people for a decision – a series of decisions – that were not made freely by Pharaoh himself? Punishment presupposes guilt. Guilt presupposes responsibility. Responsibility presupposes freedom. We do not blame weights for falling or the sun for shining. Natural forces are not choices made by reflecting on alternatives. Homo sapiens alone is free. Take away that freedom and you take away our humanity. How then can it say, as it does in our parsha (Ex. 7: 3) that God hardened[1] Pharaoh's heart?

All the commentators are exercised by this question. Maimonides and others note a striking feature of the narrative. For the first five plagues we read that Pharaoh himself hardened his heart. Only later, during the last five plagues, do we read about God doing so. The last five plagues were therefore a punishment for the first five refusals, freely made by Pharaoh himself.[2]

A second approach, in precisely the opposite direction, is that during the last five plagues God intervened not to harden but to strengthen Pharaoh's heart. He acted to ensure that Pharaoh kept his freedom and did not lose it. Such was the impact of the plagues that in the normal course of events a national leader would have no choice but to give in to a superior force. As Pharaoh's own advisers said before the eighth plague, "Do you not yet realize that Egypt is destroyed." To give in at that point would have been action under duress, not a genuine change of heart. Such is the approach of Yosef Albo[3] and Ovadiah Sforno.[4]

A third approach calls into question the very meaning of the phrase, "God hardened Pharaoh's heart." In a profound sense God, author of history, is behind every event, every act, every gust of wind that blows, every drop of rain that falls. Normally however we do not attribute human action to God. We are what we are because that is how we have chosen to be, even if this was written long before in the divine script for humankind. What do we attribute to an act of God? Something that is unusual, falling so far outside the norms of human behaviour that we find it hard to explain in any other way than to say, surely this happened for a purpose.

God himself says about Pharaoh's obstinacy, that it allowed him to demonstrate to all humanity that even

the greatest empire is powerless against the hand of Heaven. Pharaoh acted freely, but his last refusals were so strange that it was obvious to everyone that God had anticipated this. It was predictable, part of the script. God had disclosed this to Abraham centuries earlier when he told him in a fearful vision that his descendants would be strangers in a land not theirs (Gen. 15: 13-14).

These are all interesting and plausible interpretations. It seems to me, though, that the Torah is telling a deeper story and one that never loses its relevance. Philosophers and scientists have tended to think in terms of abstractions and universals. Some have concluded that we have freewill, others that we don't. There is no conceptual space in between.

In life, however, that is not the way freedom works at all. Consider addiction. The first few times you smoke a cigarette or drink alcohol or take drugs, you so freely. You know the risks but you ignore them. As time goes on, your dependency increases until the craving is so intense that you are almost powerless to resist it. At that point you may have to go into rehabilitation. You no longer, on your own, have the ability to stop. As the Talmud says, "A prisoner cannot release himself from prison."^[5]

Addiction is a physical phenomenon. But there are moral equivalents. For example, suppose on one significant occasion, you tell a lie. People now believe something about you that is not true. As they question you about it, or it comes up in conversation, you find yourself having to tell more lies to support the first. "Oh what a tangled web we weave," said Sir Walter Scott, "when first we practise to deceive."

That is as far as individuals are concerned. When it comes to organisations, the risk is even greater. Let us say that a senior member of staff has made a costly mistake that, if exposed, threatens the entire future of the company. He will make an attempt to cover it up. To do so he must enlist the help of others, who become his co-conspirators. As the circle of deception widens, it becomes part of the corporate culture, making it ever more difficult for honest people within the organisation to resist or protest. It then needs the rare courage of a whistle-blower to expose and halt the deception. There have been many such stories in recent years.^[6]

Within nations, especially non-democratic ones, the risk is higher still. In commercial enterprises, losses can be quantified. Someone somewhere knows how much has been lost, how many debts have been concealed and where. In politics, there may be no such objective test. It is easy to claim that a policy is

working and explain away apparent counter-indicators. A narrative emerges and becomes the received wisdom. Hans Christian Anderson's tale, The Emperor's New Clothes, is the classic parable of this phenomenon. A child sees the truth and in innocence blurts it out, breaking the conspiracy of silence on the part of the king's counsellors.

We lose our freedom gradually, often without noticing it. That is what the Torah has been implying almost from the beginning. The classic statement of freewill appears in the story of Cain and Abel. Seeing that Cain is angry that his offering has not found favour, He says to him: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Genesis 4: 7). The maintenance of freewill, especially in a state of high emotion like anger, needs willpower. As we have noted before in these studies there can be what Daniel Goleman calls an 'amygdala hijack' in which instinctive reaction takes the place of reflective decision and we do things that are harmful to us as well as to others.^[7] That is the emotional threat to freedom.

Then there is a social threat. After the Holocaust, a number of path-breaking experiments were undertaken to judge the power of conformism and obedience to authority. Solomon Asch conducted a series of experiments in which eight people were gathered in a room and were shown a line, then asked which of three others was the same length. Unknown to the eighth, the seven others were associates of the experimenter and were following his instructions. On a number of occasions the seven gave an answer that was clearly false, yet in 75 per cent of cases the eighth was willing to give an answer, in conformity with the group, he knew to be false.

Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram showed that ordinary individuals were willing to inflict what appeared to be devastatingly painful electric shocks on someone in an adjacent room when instructed to do so by an authority figure, the experimenter.^[8] The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Philip Zimbardo, divided participants into the roles of prisoners and guards. Within days the 'guards' were acting cruelly and in some cases abusively toward the prisoners and the experiment, planned to last a fortnight, had to be called off after six days.^[9]

The power of conformism, as these experiments showed, is immense. That I believe is why Abraham was told to leave his land, his birthplace and his father's house. These are the three factors – culture,

community and early childhood – that circumscribe our freedom. Jews through the ages have been in but not of society. To be a Jew means keeping a calibrated distance from the age and its idols. Freedom needs time to make reflective decisions and distance so as not to be lulled into conformity.

Most tragically there is the moral threat. We sometimes forget, or don't even know, that the conditions of slavery the Israelites experienced in Egypt were often enough felt historically by Egyptians themselves. The great pyramid of Giza, built more than a thousand years before the exodus, before even the birth of Abraham, reduced much of Egypt to a slave labour colony for twenty years.[10] When life becomes cheap and people are seen as a means not an end, when the worst excesses are excused in the name of tradition and rulers have absolute power, then conscience is eroded and freedom lost because the culture has created insulated space in which the cry of the oppressed can no longer be heard.

That is what the Torah means when it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. Enslaving others, Pharaoh himself became enslaved. He became a prisoner of the values he himself had espoused. Freedom in the deepest sense, the freedom to do the right and the good, is not a given. We acquire it, or lose it, gradually. In the end tyrants bring about their own destruction, whereas those with willpower, courage and the willingness to go against the consensus, acquire a monumental freedom. That is what Judaism is: an invitation to freedom by resisting the idols and siren calls of the age.

[1] Three different verbs are used in the narrative to indicate hardening of the heart: k-sh-h, ch-z-k and k-b-d. They have different nuances: the first means 'harden,' the second, 'strengthen,' and the third, 'make heavy.'

[2] Maimonides, Hilkhos Teshuvah 6: 3.

[3] Albo, Ikkarim, IV, 25.

[4] Commentary to Ex. 7: 3.

[5] Berakhot 5b.

[6] On Enron, see Bethany McLean and Peter Elkind. The Smartest Guys in the Room: The Amazing Rise and Scandalous Fall of Enron. New York: Portfolio, 2003.

[7] Daniel Goleman, Emotional Intelligence. New York: Bantam, 1995.

[8] Stanley Milgram, Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.

[9] Philip G. Zimbardo, The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil. New York: Random House, 2007.

[10] It has been calculated, based on a ten hour working day, that one giant block of stone weighing over a ton, would have to be transported into place every two minutes of every day for twenty years.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

"In order that you should know that I Hashem am in the midst of the world". 'Bekerev Haaretz'. (8:18)

Here we learn the purpose of all of the miracles, not only in Egypt but throughout history. The open demonstrations of Hashem's presence come to teach that even when not openly visible, yet it is Hashem's presence that constantly fills the world and maintains the existence of the world and manages all the events of the world.

Just as these miracles were wondrous demonstrations of Hashem's deeds, so are all the "natural" processes and all the events and even all objects are demonstrations of Hashem's deeds. Every process or object or event is a wondrous miracle, and it is solely due to the blindness of habit that men fail to recognize the miracles that constantly fill the world around us.

Seeing is a miracle, hearing is a miracle, thinking is a miracle, eating and digesting are miracles, the birth of a child is a miracle, an enzyme is a miracle, DNA is a miracle, a chromosome is a miracle and an atom is a miracle.

Thus every miracle is intended for the purpose to demonstrate that "I HASHEM AM (ALWAYS) IN THE MIDST OF THE WORLD" and that every phenomenon should be studied to discern in it the miracles of Hashem's wisdom and power and kindness.

The Rav taught that the Ten Plagues were especially brought by Hashem for Israel to gain Yirat Samayim. As it states, "He is Hashem Our G-d, in all of the world are His judgments" (Tehillim). That all of the happenings in the world are only being brought by Hashem in His capacity of 'Hashem Our G-d'.

The Makot were ten vitamin pills of Emunah for our Jewish Nation in order for us to gain a sensory perception and a heightened Awareness of Hashem The G-d of Yisrael, the only One we can depend on.

Adapted from "A NATION IS BORN" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller