

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VA'ERA

Haftarah: Yeshayahu 66:1-24

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Shabbat is Rosh Hodesh Shebat

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Editors Notes

A Silver Lining in an Ugly Cloud

We came to Israel for an extended weekend to visit our daughter Mikhayla and Daniel and our son Moses who is here for the year. Jerusalem seemed like the perfect choice for "Yeshiva Week" and from the crowds, it looks like much of the community had the same idea. I heard from friends that visitors to Aruba were significantly less than in past years. My son Jonah related a story he heard from Rav Duvi Ben Soussan on LearnTorah.com.

The Talmud and Midrash relate that following his conquering of Jerusalem, Titus boasted that he defeated Hashem within His own house and Hashem lacked the power to prevent Titus from doing anything he desired. Titus returns to Rome with the pillage from the Temple and continues to brag of his greatness seeing himself as King of the world in his own glory. As he celebrates with drink, Hashem sends a mosquito into Titus and the mosquito settles in his brain. This smallest of creatures begins to drive Titus mad. Well this year Hashem sent a different mosquito and 700 Syrian families cancelled their Aruba reservations and they all came to Israel for the week. That mosquito has a name. Zika. Jerusalem as always is amazing. A dozen celebrated their bar mitzvah on Thursday and probably a dozen more on the following Monday and Thursday. Three boys went up to the Torah at the Ades Synagogue on Shabbat and the hotel minyanim were overflowing at

the Citadel, King David, Waldorf and Enbal (where Flatbush brought a large group of High School students on a Chesed trip).

On Thursday night amidst all the joy, one dark cloud came passing through. But in Jerusalem even dark clouds have silver linings.

We were coming back from a very late bite at Machaneh Yehuda walking along Yafo (where the light rail passes). We crossed King George and bumped into a dear friend, Rabbi Y who learned with Jonah at Shaar Yashuv. Rabbi Y is an amazing teacher and person filled with chen and so loved by his students and everyone he meets. He had come to Israel with his 13 year old son, and was walking with his aunt and his cousin. His cousin, an American, who had come to Israel and joined the army, was wearing his uniform. He was also working on his observance and had a kippah on his head and short beard. They told us they had planned on going into Mea Shearim for some chulent and kugel and to find a minyan for arbit/maariv. But the locals in the religious neighborhood were not very inviting. In fact seeing a bearded man with a kippah in uniform enraged them and they suddenly were transformed into the residents of Sodom, yelling at this Rabbi, his child, his aunt and his cousin and then pelting them as well. Rabbi Y said he was close to tears as he watched his son experience such hatred from fellow Jews and feared what this would do to his cousin's road to Torah. Such an event could turn off anyone for life. How those who supposedly represent the Haredim – which translates as those who tremble before G-d – stoop to such terrible behavior? They are living in a country where these boys literally put their life at risk for them every day. Where was their hakarat hatov? The Hebrew term for gratitude is hakarat hatov, which means, literally, "recognizing the good", and appreciating what others have done for you.

How far is a Jew required to go to give Hakarat HaTov? Our name Yehudim comes from the word Hodaah or Modeh, which translates as both admit and thanks. To truly appreciate, one needs to admit that they lacked something which another provided for which they then give thanks.

We read in this week's portion that when the first plague of blood was to strike Mitzrayim - Egypt, "God

said to Moses, tell Aaron to take your staff and stretch out your hand . . . that they [the waters] may become blood." The rabbis ask, Why is Aaron the intermediary? And the rabbis explain that Moshe owed the waters an everlasting expression of hakarat hatov. Why? Because the river had protected Moses when his mother laid his basket at the river's edge, "therefore it was not smitten by him neither at the plague of blood nor at that of frogs." That explains why it was Aaron who carried out the first two plagues.

Strangely enough, we see the same with the plague of lice or kinim. The Midrash recalls Moses, before fleeing Egypt in his youth, killing the Egyptian who was beating a Jewish slave. At the time he hid the body within the sand. Hashem said to Moshe, the sand that protected you when you struck the Egyptian, could not be struck by you." Hakarat hatov is an obligation on the beneficiary, for no other reason than he benefited. If Moses was seemingly required to show appreciation to an inanimate object like water or sand, how much more so is this required when the giver is a person? Where did these haredim go to school?

When one ponders this trait these people regularly show, one must tremble in fear for what this truly means. We read last week, "A new king arose over Egypt who did not know of Joseph" . Our Sages ask: can it be that he did not know of Joseph? Even if he were a new king, did he not have some basic knowledge of Egyptian history? What the Torah means is that he knew who Joseph was, but he did not WANT to know who he was! He lacked hakarat hatov for all that Joseph had done for the Egyptian people. Chazal comment: "today he does not know Joseph, tomorrow, he is destined to say 'I do not know Hashem!'" This means that one who lacks hakarat hatov for his fellow human being will eventually deny the good Hashem has done for him.

On Friday night we prayed at the Yisa Beracha Synagogue on Jabotinsky where Rav Ovadia z'sl would give his Saturday night classes broadcast throughout the world. The Rabbi of the Synagogue explained that this quality of HaKarat HaTov is the character trait which chiefly defines the greatest sages of Israel. He recalled that Rav Ovadia who never wasted time and weighed each moment of his daily schedule honored him and his wife in joining them for their engagement party, their wedding ceremony and remaining at the party through the sheva berachot. This was highly unusual. Why? Rav Ovadia had asked this rabbi to proof read some of his works as he wrote them. The rabbi told us that anyone would have jumped at this opportunity and

honor to participate in the rabbi's publications. Still Rav Ovadia showed tremendous hakarat hatov and appreciation.

We can literally write a book with a hundred stories off the top of my head with examples of hakarat hatov from our great rabbis quoting the Torah, the Talmud, the rishonim and all the way to today. Did those Haredim in Meah Shearim that night miss all these stories? Did they learn anything during all their hours in the Bet Midrash? Is anything they learned even worth the time they spent studying?

Didn't I promise a silver lining? Well it wasn't found in Meah Shearim. It was found along the side of a train stop and then down an alley by a bar.

Rabbi Y told us that after getting chased from Meah Shearim, they were on their way to the Kotel – The Western Wall - for a late minyan. We were ready to join them. But at that hour we weren't excited about the twenty five minute journey through the old city and the late night walk back. Then we realized with Rabbi Y, his son, his cousin, Moses and me, we were five. We were half a minyan. Moses saw a friend who agreed to join. That made six. We saw a young chabadnik who suggested we walk down to the end of the next alley towards a Chabad house where there might be a straggler or two. By the time we made it halfway down the alley though we gathered first three, then four making ten. And a few others came to join. We sort of represented the spectrum of Jews. Army guys, Hesder guys, haredi guys, Brooklyn boys, Australians and Europeans and then some of the bar patrons in various levels of sobriety decided to come out and pray. The thirteen year old who was shocked a few minutes before from the behavior of one Jew towards another now saw Jews from strikingly different backgrounds coming together in unison and unity. You need to try to picture this ragtag group as the clock struck midnight, in front of an alley bar with the music playing. Black hats, baseball hats, army caps, crochet knit Nachman caps and plain old yalmakahs, all together. The cousin in the army made new friends in that alley that night; guys who had been through what he was going through and who promised to be there for him in the future. And we were all very moved by the experience.

I don't know if Rabbi Y ever found the chulent and kugel he was looking for that night, but we all did find some very powerful spiritual food and an experience we will remember always. And for that I have hakarat hatov for putting us there and then at that hour and helping us to see that silver lining. Thanks Hashem! Shabbat Shalom, David Bibi

**"Isolationist? No - Donald Trump has a vision for the world and he'll make it happen," from the Daily Telegraph (of London):
By John Bolton - former US ambassador to the United Nations**

Donald Trump's inauguration unquestionably heralds a rejuvenated US-UK Special Relationship. His view of America's international role requires it, featuring, for example, reversing Barack Obama's disdainful relegation of Britain to "the back of the queue" for trade negotiations after leaving the EU. Symbolically, mere hours after taking the constitutional oath, President Trump returned Winston Churchill's bust to the Oval Office. Theresa May's imminent visit to Washington is, therefore, perfectly timed.

In his 16-minute inaugural address, Mr Trump's focus was domestic, contrasting with John F Kennedy's even-briefer 1961 speech emphasising Cold War themes. Post-Kennedy, the addresses became longer and less memorable, sounding like programmatic State of the Union messages. Mr Trump chose brevity for the sake of emphasis. Though directed primarily at US voters, but also perfectly appropriate for UK Leave supporters, Mr Trump said: "It is the right of all nations to put their own interests first." Indeed, that happens universally, but only America, Britain and a few others are criticised for it. The new president stressed that his administration would be "transferring power from Washington and giving it back to you, the American people". But he also wanted to dramatise national unity and patriotism. In a hint of Disraelian "one nation" language, Mr Trump said: "Through our loyalty to our country, we will rediscover our loyalty to each other."

Mr Trump's emphasis on "making America great again" and "America first" both highlight his implicit revival of American exceptionalism and its essentially inexorable consequence that Washington's international role will not only not diminish but increase. Although critics cringe at the historical antecedent to "America first", they should remember John McCain's inspiring 2008 presidential campaign slogan, "country first". Just which country do readers think Mr McCain had in mind?

Some European commentators incorrectly predicted doom and gloom about Washington's future commitments to Nato. Certainly, Mr Trump has criticised Nato, as has almost everyone familiar with its sclerotic decision-making and the failure of too many members to meet their agreed levels of defence spending. Mr Trump is merely saying publicly and emphatically what others have said privately for decades: Nato needs to shape up. That's

what Mr Trump meant in his inaugural address: "We will reinforce old alliances." Is there something in that sentence that is hard to understand?

Undoubtedly, Mr Trump is not as awed by the EU as Mr Obama or even previous Republican presidents. And with good reason. For decades, the EU has failed on multiple fronts, largely because it became (or always was) primarily an unrealistic political project intended to eviscerate the very concept of the nation state, rather than an economic one. The EU is failing because the citizens of its member states do not feel the EU's remote leaders have their best interests at heart. Mr Trump's victory and inaugural address should be warning signals to Europe's tired and disconnected elites.

It is a logical extension of this approach that Mrs May will become the first foreign leader to hold talks with the new president later this week. Even though few of the new administration's political appointees are in office as yet, there will never be greater receptivity to inventive ideas for maximising the post-Brexit economic benefits to both countries. Mrs May and her advisers need to think creatively about the trade and broader economic relationship they want to achieve.

Moreover, a mutually beneficial bilateral US-UK agreement will strengthen London's hand with Brussels. Contrary to what critics have said, Mr Trump is not against free trade. He simply expects other countries to adhere to the terms they agreed to – something Britain should have no trouble doing. And remember, this is the man who wrote *The Art of the Deal*.

On international political issues, Mr Trump stated unambiguously that his priority is to "unite the civilised world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth". This is no small task. By its terms, it means not merely defeating Isis and al-Qaeda, but also terrorism's principal funder and state sponsor, the ayatollahs' regime in Tehran. This is not the message of an isolationist president, or one who misses the fundamental ideological threat posed by the radical Islamists. It unquestionably means the US will look to its allies for counsel and co-operation in their common struggle.

Summary of the Perasha Va'era - Plagues 1-7

- 1- Hashem tells Moshe to go back and tell Benei Israel Hashem will save them and take them as a nation. They don't listen. Hashem tells Moshe to go to Paroah.
- 2- The parasha formally introduces Moshe and Aharon giving their lineage
- 3- Hashem tells Moshe what to expect. He will harden Paroah's heart and at first he will not listen. Hashem will then bring wonders and Mitsrayim will see Hashem's strength.
- 4- Moshe and Aharon go to Paroah. They bring a sign turning a stick into a snake but he does not listen. They return again bringing the macot of dam and then sefarde'ah.
- 5- Macat Sefardeah ends, Macat Kinim, The warnings for macat Arov
- 6- Macot Arov, Dever, and Shechin
- 7- Macat Barad

FROM THE RABBIS OF THE JERSEY SHORE

“Hashem strengthened the heart of Pharaoh and he did not listen to them as Hashem had spoken to Moshe.” (Shemot 9:12)

During the first five plagues, Hashem did not interfere with Pharaoh's power of free choice. During the final five, however, when Pharaoh had already displayed his reluctance to repent, Hashem punished him with the loss of his personal free will. Although Pharaoh was no longer in control of his own destiny, Hashem punished him as though he continued to sin of his own volition. From Hashem's treatment of the wicked Pharaoh, we may determine how Hashem would treat the righteous in a similar situation.

Rabbi Moshe Feinstein explains, that just as Pharaoh was punished for his evil deeds by losing the ability to fight his evil inclination, there are those who are rewarded by Hashem for their good deeds with the removal of their evil inclination. The Talmud tells us (Baba Batra 17a) that this is the meaning of David Hamelech's statement in Tehillim (109:22), “My heart has died within me.” King David said that through his good deeds, he earned the removal of his evil inclination. Therefore, his “heart,” a reference to the evil inclination which until that point had resided in his heart, could be said to have died.

When Hashem rewards a person for his good deeds, He takes into account the amount of effort a person invests in his actions. The lame person who limps to shul every morning may earn more reward with his five-minute walk than the athlete who jogs two miles to shul. When Hashem removes the evil inclination from the righteous, it allows them to serve Hashem without any struggle at all. Will this lessen

the amount of reward they will receive? Surely not. If Pharaoh, who no longer had the ability to fight his evil inclination, was punished as if he chose not to fight it, certainly the righteous, who no longer must fight their evil inclination, will be rewarded as if they battled mightily – and won. 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

RABBI ELI MANSOUR

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Every Drop Counts

Parashat Vaera begins with a series of promises that G-d tells Moshe to communicate to Beneh Yisrael in Egypt. One of these promises is “Ve'lakahti Etchem Li Le'am” – “I shall take you for Myself as a nation” (6:7).

The Midrash (Bamidbar Rabba, Parashat Naso) comments that this promise was made in reward for Abraham Abinu's hospitality to his three guests. When Abraham welcomed these guests, who were actually angels, he invited them to “take a bit of water” to wash their legs (Bereshit 18:4). In reward for this offer to “take” water, G-d promised that He would “take” Abraham's descendants as His special nation.

The Rebbe of Bobov explained the deep significance of the connection that the Midrash draws between Abraham's offer to his guests and G-d's promise to Beneh Yisrael before the Exodus. Water, the Rebbe

noted, symbolizes repentance, as in the verse in Echa, "Pour forth your heart like water in the presence of Hashem." Abraham's offer to bring the guests "a bit of water" thus represents the value that G-d ascribes to even "a bit" of repentance. While we of course ought to strive to achieve complete repentance, we must recognize that personal change and growth is a long, gradual process that we should be undergoing throughout our lifetime. We cannot make a fundamental change overnight. Change must happen incrementally, one step followed by another. And this is the message G-d was conveying to Beneh Yisrael on the eve of the Exodus. Tradition teaches that during the period of bondage in Egypt Beneh Yisrael fell to the "forty-ninth level of impurity," and found themselves on the brink of the fiftieth level, from which they would have been unable to recover. G-d wanted to redeem them despite their dire spiritual state, and so He gave them just two Misvot – circumcision and the paschal sacrifice – through which they could earn redemption. Even this relatively minor move upwards was very significant – significant enough for a nation on the brink of eternal spiritual destruction to suddenly be deemed worthy of a miraculous salvation. In the merit of "a bit of water," a small move towards repentance, they were taken as G-d's beloved nation.

It is told that Rav Haim Vital, the most illustrious student of the Arizal, asked his great Rabbi how their generation of Jews could possibly earn the final redemption. After all, if Mashiah did not come during the times of the Tanna'im or the times of the Amora'im, who were far, far greater in knowledge and piety than later generations, then why would Mashiah come during the times of the Arizal and Rav Haim Vital? The Arizal answered that to the contrary, Mashiah was far more likely to come in his time than during the time of the Talmudic Sages. In periods when society is overrun by sin and impurity, making it exceedingly difficult to remain faithful to the Torah and to live lives of holiness, Misvot are especially valuable and significant. A Misva performed under such conditions, when the atmosphere and culture draw a person away from Kedusha, is worth far more than a Misva performed under spiritually pristine conditions. And thus, the Arizal taught, the Jews of his time actually had a better chance of bringing the final redemption, as their Misvot were especially valuable.

Society has, unfortunately, deteriorated to much lower and frightening depths of depravity since the times of the Arizal – and this makes his message all the more poignant and relevant in our times. We must not despair over the dismal spiritual level of our generation, and figure that our Misvot are worth so

little considering our low stature. To the contrary – our low spiritual level makes our Misvot especially precious before G-d. As in the case of our ancestors in Egypt, when even "a bit" of Teshuba sufficed to render them worthy of salvation, we can earn G-d's compassion and His miraculous redemption by working hard to do the best we can. Every drop of Teshuva, of Torah, and of Misvot is immensely powerful and significant, and makes a great impact. We should never minimize the significance of any small Misva act, of any extra bit of effort invested in prayer, of any small amount of charity we give, of any small amount of Torah that we study, or of any wrongful act that we decide to avoid, because each and every one brings us and our nation one step closer to our final redemption.

**VICTOR BIBI
SOD HAPARASHA**

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Rabbi Wein

BEDFELLOWS

A recent issue of a local newspaper here in Israel had on its front page a photograph of the Pope of Rome together with the head of the Palestinian Authority, Mohammed Abbas, at the ceremony of the dedication of the Palestinian Embassy at the Vatican and its recognition as a state by the Holy See.

Now the cynics may be forgiven for captioning that picture as one non-state establishing diplomatic relations with another non-state. Be that as it may, I found that photograph to be most disturbing if not even chilling.

The ancient enemy of the Jewish people, that has on its record unending persecution and, directly or indirectly, the blood of millions of innocents, somehow is joined with the more modern enemy in its efforts to delegitimize the Jewish state of Israel and encourage all of them resort to terrorism and diplomatic extremism.

The smiley faces that appear in the photograph have a weirdly smug and self-satisfied look upon them. Whether the Palestinians have an embassy in the Vatican or not probably makes very little difference in the long run, regarding the future of the Palestinian people and/or the Palestinian Authority. The action of the Vatican here certainly does not advance the

cause of peace between Israel and the Palestinians and therefore becomes only a symbolic gesture of the bias against Israel, which so pervades the Catholic Church and Europe generally.

Abbas and before him Arafat – remember him? – have been doing this macabre diplomatic dance for the past three decades. So far, only death and destruction, chaos and corruption are the results of these actions, which are purely ritualistic and symbolic but contain no substance and advance little hope for any meaningful solution.

If the Pope and the Church wish to be truly constructive in trying to settle the century old conflict between the Arabs and Jews here in the Land of Israel then they should make it clear to the Palestinian Authority that only Israel can help create a state for them and that their negotiating stance must be realistic, not extreme and subject to flexibility.

Israel naturally also must enter negotiations with a realistic stance and flexible mindset. However, by pandering to the Palestinian Authority, creating false illusions and fake states, the Church and the Western world only make any accommodation or agreement more difficult to achieve. And it is obvious that the Palestinian Authority is more interested in such hollow and public relations victories than in eventually producing a better life for its people and allowing some sort of nonviolent accommodation to exist between it and Israel.

Posturing may bring cheerful headlines and smiling photographs but it cannot really lead to any meaningful accomplishments on the ground. Abbas knows this to be true but as long as the world is willing to play his game and be the patsy of the Palestinians there is no reason for him to change his tactics and come down to earth in reality. He will just continue to flit about the world opening imaginary embassies, flying the flag of a non-state and not really accomplishing solid achievements for his people.

The Catholic Church sees itself as a moral arbitrator of peace and harmony in world society. As such, it could position itself to be a fair and neutral mediator in the Arab – Jewish struggle here in the Land of Israel. But the Church itself, in spite of attempts over the last decades to free itself from its anti-Jewish malevolent past, has not yet escaped from the clutches of its millennia old unwillingness to tolerate Jews, Judaism and certainly a Jewish state.

It maintains diplomatic relations with Israel but is always critical of whatever Israel does. The fact that only in Israel, out of all of the countries of the Middle East, does the Roman Catholic Church operate without restriction and in freedom seems to count for little as far as the diplomacy of the Vatican regarding Israel and the Palestinians is concerned.

This is truly to be regretted for it forfeits an opportunity for the Church to rectify a long history of past wrongs and shameful behavior. It need not be pro-Israel. It need only be no longer anti-Israel. But apparently that is a very rickety bridge for the Church to attempt to cross. The Church had a very long way to go in somehow normalizing relations with the Jewish people after the Holocaust and over the last half-century. It has gone part of the way but unless it overcomes its bias against the Jewish state and its legitimate interests and right to exist, the road ahead still lies long and hard.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks Freedom & Truth

Why did Moses tell Pharaoh, if not a lie, then less than the full truth? Here is the conversation between him and Pharaoh after the fourth plague, arov, “swarms of insects” (some say “wild animals”):

Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron and said, “Go, sacrifice to your God here in the land.” But Moses said, “That would not be right. The sacrifices we offer the Lord our God would be detestable to the Egyptians. And if we offer sacrifices that are detestable in their eyes, will they not stone us? We must take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, as He commands us.” (Ex. 8:21-23)

Not just here but throughout, Moses makes it seem as if all he is asking is for permission for the people to undertake a three day journey, to offer sacrifices to God and (by implication) then to return. So, in their first appearance before Pharaoh, Moses and Aaron say:

“This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: ‘Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival to Me in the wilderness.’”

Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey Him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.”

Then they said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Now let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness to offer sacrifices to the Lord our God, or

He may strike us with plagues or with the sword.” (Ex. 5:1-3)

God even specifies this before the mission has begun, saying to Moses at the burning bush: “You and the elders of Israel will then go to the king of Egypt. You must tell him, ‘The Lord, God of the Hebrews, revealed Himself to us. Now we request that you allow us to take a three day journey into the desert, to sacrifice to the Lord our God’” (3:18).

The impression remains to the very end. After the Israelites have left, we read:

The king of Egypt received news that the people were escaping. Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds regarding the people, and said, “What have we done? How could we have released Israel from doing our work?” (14:5)

At no stage does Moses say explicitly that he is proposing that the people should be allowed to leave permanently, never to return. He talks of a three day journey. There is an argument between him and Pharaoh as to who is to go. Only the adult males? Only the people, not the cattle? Moses consistently asks for permission to worship God, at some place that is not Egypt. But he does not speak about freedom or the promised land. Why not? Why does he create, and not correct, a false impression? Why can he not say openly what he means?

The commentators offer various explanations. R. Shmuel David Luzzatto (Italy, 1800-1865) says that it was impossible for Moses to tell the truth to a tyrant like Pharaoh. R. Yaakov Mecklenburg (Germany, 1785-1865, Ha-Ktav v'eha-Kabbalah) says that technically Moses did not tell a lie. He did indeed mean that he wanted the people to be free to make a journey to worship God, and he never said explicitly that they would return.

The Abarbanel (Lisbon 1437 – Venice 1508) says that God told Moses deliberately to make a small request, to demonstrate Pharaoh’s cruelty and indifference to his slaves. All they were asking was for a brief respite from their labours to offer sacrifices to God. If he refused this, he was indeed a tyrant. Rav Elhanan Samet (Iyyunim be-Parshot Ha-Shevua, Exodus, 189) cites an unnamed commentator who says simply that this was war between Pharaoh and the Jewish people, and it war it is permitted, indeed sometimes necessary, to deceive.

Actually, however, the terms of the encounter between Moses and Pharaoh are part of a wider pattern that we have already observed in the Torah.

When Jacob leaves Laban we read: “Jacob decided to go behind the back of Laban the Aramean, and did not tell him that he was leaving” (Gen. 31:20). Laban protests this behaviour: “How could you do this? You went behind my back and led my daughters away like prisoners of war! Why did you have to leave so secretly? You went behind my back and told me nothing!” (31:26-27).

Jacob again has to tell at best a half-truth when Esau suggests that they travel together: “You know that the children are weak, and I have responsibility for the nursing sheep and cattle. If they are driven hard for even one day, all the sheep will die. Please go ahead of me, my lord” (33:13-14). This, though not strictly a lie, is a diplomatic excuse.

When Jacob’s sons are trying to rescue their sister Dina who has been raped and abducted by Shechem the Hivite, they “replied deceitfully” (34:13) when Shechem and his father proposed that the entire family should come and settle with them, telling them that they could only do so if all the males of the town underwent circumcision.

Earlier still we find that three times Abraham and Isaac, forced to leave home because of famine, have to pretend that they are their wives’ brothers not their husbands because they fear that otherwise they will be killed so that Sarah or Rebecca could be taken into the king’s harem (Gen. 12, 20, 26).

These six episodes cannot be entirely accidental or coincidental to the biblical narrative as a whole. The implication seems to be this. Outside the promised land Jews in the biblical age are in danger if they tell the truth. They are at constant risk of being killed or at best enslaved.

Why? Because they are powerless in an age of power. They are a small family, at best a small nation, in an age of empires. They have to use their wits to survive. By and large they do not tell lies but they can create a false impression. This is not how things should be. But it is how they were before Jews had their own land, their one and only defensible space. It is how people in impossible situations are forced to be if they are to exist at all.

No-one should be forced to live a lie. In Judaism, truth is the seal of God and the essential precondition of trust between human beings. But when your people is being enslaved, its male children murdered, you have to liberate them by whatever means are possible. Moses, who had already seen that his first encounter with Pharaoh made things worse for his people – they still had to make the same quota of

bricks but now also had to gather their own straw (5:6-8) – did not want to risk making them worse still.

The Torah here is not justifying deceit. To the contrary, it is condemning a system in which telling the truth may put your life at risk, as it still does in many tyrannical or totalitarian societies today. Judaism – a religion of dissent, questioning and “arguments for the sake of heaven” – is a faith that values intellectual honesty and moral truthfulness above all things. The Psalmist says: “Who shall ascend the mountain of the Lord and who shall stand in His holy place? One who has clean hands and a pure heart, who has not taken My name in vain nor sworn deceitfully” (Ps. 24:3-4). Malachi says of one who speaks in God’s name: “The law of truth was in his mouth, and unrighteousness was not found in his lips” (Mal. 2:6). Every Amidah ends with the prayer, “My God, guard my tongue from evil and my lips from deceitful speech.”

What the Torah is telling us in these six narratives in Genesis and the seventh in Exodus is the connection between freedom and truth. Where there is freedom there can be truth. Otherwise there cannot. A society where people are forced to be less than fully honest merely to survive and not provoke further oppression is not the kind of society God wants us to make.

AS HEARD FROM RABBI AVIGDOR MILLER Z'TL

Rabbi Avigdor Miller was asked this question on one of his famous Thursday night classes, Tape #795. Why do we pray if Hashem knows and does always what is best for us? Why should we pray?

Rabbi Avigdor Miller answered.
 “We’re praying because the most important part of our lives is to be aware of Hashem. We’re not giving Hashem direction what to do for us. We’re not telling Him what’s necessary for us. When you pray, its התפלל means you’re making yourself think. פלל means “To Think.” מי פלל means “Who thought.” ללפתה means “Make yourself think.” When you pray, you’re thinking about Hashem. When you’re asking Hashem something, you’re thinking about Hashem. That’s the purpose of praying.”

thereby demonstrating that we are 'seekers'.
 Greeting people with a full face and pleasant smile along with encouraging words.

Saying words of appreciation to a spouse. A nice word to a child. Helping people in need.
 Praying for the protection of Jews worldwide.
 Thinking about and thanking Hashem.

Learning Hashem's Torah.
 These are some of the opportunities we have.
 "In the path a person wills to go, Hashem will help to direct him".

Be a Seeker. Go for it!

Adapted from "A Nation Is Born" by Rabbi Avigdor Miller ZT'L