

number of large bills from his wallet and said, "Fine! I will personally pay off her loan! The widow may remain in her house. It will all be settled!"

When the *gabbai* returned, he related the incident and added, "This is why Moshe was sent to *Klal Yisrael*, even though the people would probably (at first) be reluctant to listen. The words of Hashem, by their very nature, will ultimately be heard."

הירא את דבר ד'

Who among the servants of Pharaoh feared the word of

G-d. (9:20)

The Torah tells us that the G-d-fearing Egyptians brought their animals indoors for fear of the hail which would strike the country. *Chazal* derive from here *Tov she'b'nechashim ratzutz es mocho*, "The best of snakes, smash his head." (In other words, there is no such thing as a good snake.) *Chazal* base this statement on the fact that, when Pharaoh required chariots and horses, he had to obtain these horses from someone. Since all of Egypt's animals had been killed, from where could Pharaoh have gotten the animals? Apparently, the G-d-fearing Egyptians who had saved their animals by listening to Hashem later contributed to Pharaoh's war machine. The G-d-fearing Egyptians were far from G-d-fearing – once the danger had passed. *Chazal* are teaching us that a snake remains a snake. Even if the snake earns the appellation of *yarei es dvar Hashem*, how is it possible for him to sustain this trait? If he fears G-d, he obviously fears acting like a snake. This is what *Chazal* are teaching us: a snake is a snake. The finest, most G-d-fearing snake remains a snake. His *frumkeit* will not prevail over his basic nature.

Horav Baruch Mordechai Ezrachi, Shlita, supplements this with an insightful lesson. As long as the basic nature of the snake (or anyone for that matter) is not expunged, it will remain an inherent dormant part of the subject – even if it is supposedly concealed by *yiraas Shomayim*! True *yiraas Shomayim* is not an external quality. It is real; it is intrinsic, being part and parcel of the subject's character, personality and essence. Unless the person/subject is able to transform his essence completely, such that the *yiraas Shomayim* extirpates any and every vestige of serpentine tendency from within, he remains a *nachash*, snake. Therefore, the only antidote to his poison is to smash his head.

Yiraas Shomayim should change the person. It is a transformative quality which is not merely superficial, (example: the person merely puts on *frum* "airs.") If he does not intrinsically change, his *frumkeit* is to no avail. It is not real. Sadly, we may observe individuals who manifest external signs of being devout and G-d-fearing; yet, when "push comes to shove" under pressure, they suddenly resort to acting in a manner totally unbecoming anyone of such a lofty spiritual connection. This is an indication that what you see is all that there is. Covert *yiraas Shomayim* sadly has no internal influence on the person.

Rav Ezrachi supports this from the fact that the G-d-fearing

Egyptians, when confronted with the dilemma of listening to Pharaoh or saving their animals, did what was right and brought their animals inside. They demonstrated (what was supposedly) their *yiraas Shomayim*, which transcended their fear of Pharaoh and of public opinion, but it was not inherent. It had not transformed their essential natures, for, when Pharaoh needed chariots to chase the fleeing Jews, these G-d-fearing Egyptians were prepared to give him their horses. I guess they were not that G-d-fearing after all. Later on, however, when Pharaoh needed animals, he knew exactly whom to ask. Their *yiraas Shomayim* was superficial. It had not become part of their psyches.

Va'ani Tefillah

השיבנו אבינו לחרותך וקרבונו מלכנו לעבדתך – *Hashiveinu Avinu l'Sorasecha v'kareveinu Malkeinu laavodasecha. Bring us back, our Father, to your Torah, and bring us near, our King, to your service.*

With regard to Torah study, we refer to Hashem as *Avinu*, Our Father, while concerning *avodah/tefillah/prayer*, He is referred to as *Malkeinu*, Our King. Why?

Achas Shoalti explains that *yiraas Shomayim*, Fear of Heaven, is a prerequisite for Torah study. If one's fear, however, is too intense, he is unable to maintain the relaxed mind required for analytical study. Thus, one must maintain his fear on a more relaxed level. This is achieved when one studies Torah as if he is studying with his father. The fear is present, but it is relaxed. One is comfortable with his father. Indeed, we find this delineation concerning reclining on *Pesach (Seder)*. A student may not; a son may. The difference: a son's fear of his father is not as intense. On the other hand, with regard to *tefillah*, one should picture himself standing before the King. This will elevate his level of fear, so that he can pray effectively.

In loving memory of
Miriam Bas Avraham Yehuda Jacobson
by her family

David, Susan, Danial, Breindy, Ephraim,
Adeena, Aryeh and Michelle Jacobson
and her great grandchildren

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Parashas Vaera

תשע"ז

פרשת וארא

ולקחתי אתכם לי נעם

And I will take you to Myself as a people. (6:7)

The destiny and concomitant exclusivity of *Klal Yisrael* are described in these few words. Hashem took us to Him as a nation via the medium of the Torah, which we accepted. *Horav S. R. Hirsch, zl*, observes that people have thoughtlessly grouped the Jewish religion together with the religions of the other nations of the world, when, in fact, our religion encompasses many elements beyond those commonly regarded to be integral to religion. The above verse – *Li'lam*, "To Myself as a People," clearly delineates that Judaism as established by Hashem is, indeed, not a religion at all; rather, religion is the fundamental means for becoming a part of the nation of *Yisrael*. Judaism also embraces elements, which are generally characterized as integral to religion, but the concept of Judaism is completely different and infinitely broader than the term religion as it applies to other religions.

As the term religion is understood, G-d is found in/through temples, churches, congregations, priests, etc. Nations, however, are subject only to kings, presidents, governments, etc. A nation is focused on the concept of statehood, not religion and not G-d. This is where we differ. In Judaism, G-d has established much more than a synagogue, but a nation – a nation is based upon Him in every aspect of life. *Klal Yisrael* is a nation driven by religion. It is not a religious sect whose people happen to be Jewish and are called *Yisrael*. *Klal Yisrael* is the nation, and the nation lives and is guided by its adherence to religion.

Judaism's core values and ethos are different from those of other religions. Our teachings are meant solely for us – exclusively. Our religion is based upon a *bris*, covenant, between Hashem and our nation. A covenant is a reciprocal relationship in which each party commits to the covenant. If one breaks his commitment, he severs his bond, thereby abrogating his status in the nation. When nationhood is founded upon commitment to the Torah, rejecting the Torah expunges one's relationship with the nation. He remains a Jew, because he has a biological connection with Judaism. Nationhood/*Am Yisrael* is different. It is based upon commitment to the covenant.

ולא שמעו אל משה מקוצר רוח ומעבודה קשה

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

Imagine that a person is afflicted, persecuted, the victim of a vicious and cruel despot who has enslaved him for years.

One would think that if someone would come along and tell him that it will soon be over-- he will be able to leave -- he would jump for joy and begin counting the minutes until the cuffs would be off and he could finally say good-bye to his life of misery. Yet, we see here that, when Moshe *Rabbeinu* and Aharon *Hakohen* told *Klal Yisrael* that it was finally all over, they paid no attention to them. They continued their slave labor as if nothing had happened! Had they lost all sense of feeling? Should they not have given Moshe and Aharon's message at least some consideration? Why did they completely ignore their message?

It is all about self-esteem. When a person gives up hope, he no longer cares about anything. He does not believe that salvation is just around the corner. As much as he has waited to get out, he no longer believes that it is possible. When one no longer believes in others, the next step is his own lack of self-confidence. He has lost his self-esteem. Without self-esteem, one cannot function. While many do go through the motions, that is all they are doing – going through the motions. *Horav Nachman Breslover, zl*, teaches that the greatest gift we can give a person is the gift of self-esteem. If we can return a person's self-confidence, then we have saved him.

I am very sensitive to the following story, since I am personally privy to similar instances on a regular basis. Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach was asked to visit an upstate New York prison that was home to a number of Jewish inmates. The holidays are an especially sad time for those incarcerated in restricted environments. It is a time for families to come together and share in each other's joys. In prison, one is confronted with ultimate loneliness. Prisoners have a feeling that life has moved on and left them behind. Thus, anyone who can make the effort and has the emotional temerity to visit, in order to make a fellow Jew's life a little better is performing a special *mitzvah*. Rabbi Carlebach was well known for his love of all Jews. He considered reaching out to the unaffiliated his special mission.

Baruch Hashem, Jews comprise a very small percentage of prison inmates and even those, for the most part, are not serving time for the commission of violent crimes. When we look at the crime from the victim's standpoint, however, who is to define the meaning of "violent"? It was *Chanukah* time, and Rabbi Carlebach did not hesitate to accept the invitation. It was not a short drive – three hours each way, but, to him, it was well worth the effort. The rabbi spent time with the Jewish inmates, employing his signature storytelling and singing. He then surprised the prison officials when he asked to be allowed to visit the rest of the prisoners. After receiving

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permission, he went to each block, every cell, and embraced each and every inmate and said to them, “I love you, my brother.” Obviously, the reaction was varied. Some wept, others scoffed, but no one ignored his visit. He went on to visit the dining hall where he approached hundreds of inmates, embracing and encouraging each one in the same manner. No one was going to suggest that he was prejudiced. Regardless of religious belief, color or race, the rabbi visited each man and gave him the same treatment.

As Rabbi Carlebach was about to leave, suddenly, a large, burly inmate came running over to him. This man was a giant, heavily muscled and covered with tattoos. “Rabbi, Rabbi,” he called out. “Yes, my holy friend,” Rabbi Carlebach replied with his standard greeting. “How can I help you, my holy friend?” The giant of a man stood for a moment and awkwardly looked at the ground, then suddenly burst out, “I loved your embrace so much; can I have one more?”

Rabbi Carlebach gave his characteristic smile, opened his arms and embraced the prisoner. The man wrapped his arms around the rabbi and began to weep profusely. They stood that way together for a few moments: the prisoner weeping; the rabbi euphoric. Finally, the man told the rabbi, “Never in my life have I been embraced in this way, with such love. Had I been fortunate enough to have been hugged like that ten years ago – I would never have turned to a life of crime!”

Hanging on the wall in the pediatric ward of Hadassah Hospital, is an aphorism from Rabbi Carlebach: “When you put your children to bed at night, tell them how pretty they are; and when they wake up in the morning, tell them how beautiful the world is”.

When a person’s attitude is positive, he has the ability and fortitude to deal with the difficult challenges of life. In order to have a healthy, positive attitude about life, one must first feel good about himself. Without self-esteem, one simply has no fuel with which to go forward.

ולא שמעו אל משה מקוצר רוח ומעבודה קשה They did not heed Moshe, because of shortness of breath and hard work. (6:9)

Shortness of breath, lack of spirit, and backbreaking work devastates a person, so that he does not respond favorably to assurances that he will achieve salvation. When a person is wasted, it is difficult to get him to listen – regardless of the positive nature of the message. The lack of spirit and hard work seem out of sequence relative to one another. One loses spirit as a result of overwork – not the other way around. Why does the Torah precede hard work with a lack of spirit? Perhaps spirit refers to spirituality. When a person is connected to *kedushah*, holiness, he becomes more spiritual. A spiritual person views physicality through a different lens. Physical labor does not take the same toll on a person when he is connected to Hashem. The pain exists, but man rises above it.

The evening devoted specifically to perpetuating the Egyptian bondage/liberation experience is the *Pesach Seder* night. This service, which is carried out in the context of a festive meal, is a fifteen-step process through which we relive the past, exalt in the Redemption, and pray for the future. It is a heightened transformative experience. The evening revolves around the questions asked by the children (initiated by their parents). It is all about questions and answers, since such a process facilitates this evening as a learning experience. When

people ask, they indicate interest. It is much more than a simple dialogue. The evening begins with *Kiddush*, sanctifying Hashem’s Name over a cup of wine. Traditionally, this is the *Seder’s* commencement. If the *Seder* is all about questioning, why do we not begin with the child’s *Mah Nishtanah*? Why is this night different? This is the symbolic question, which leads into the story of *Pesach*, its origin and effect on the present, as we live as Jews in a secular society.

The *Alexander Rebbe*, *zl*, explains that the questions must follow *Kiddush*, because a Jew does not initiate his *Pesach* experience -- or any religious dialogue or experience -- with questions. He must first make *Kiddush*, link himself to Hashem, to faith in Him with the utmost conviction. To question without faith is to scoff. Once one has concretized his bond with Hashem, he can then ask his questions. It is much like a person holding on to a kite which is flying in every direction in the wind. As long as the kite is rooted in a person’s hand, it may fly all over and it will not fly away. If it is not firmly connected, it will quickly be blown away. Likewise, when we are firmly rooted in Torah, we remain connected; we may question, we may wonder, we may cogitate. We will temporary move to the right, to the left, up and down – but not away.

The Jewish People’s lack of “spirit” allowed them to fall prey to the effects of the slave labor to which they have been subjected. The Holocaust years, the purgatory – both spiritual and physical/emotional, was the painful period most similar (in our time) to the travails endured in Egypt. Although we endured a thousand-year period of almost daily suffering and murder during our European exile (Eastern and Western), it was not a systematic organized debasement of persecution and brutal murder, such as was evinced during the Holocaust. Even during this time of madness, when the suffering and pain was indescribable, the faith of many Jewish men and women maintained them, carrying them to the greatest heights. Some survived to see the reward for their commitment, in the generations of committed progeny which they subsequently nurtured.

Perhaps, this is why the *Seder* begins with *Kadeish*, which means sanctify (yourself). One would think that the term *Kiddush*, referring to reciting the blessing over the wine, would be more appropriate. I think the *Baal Haggadah* is intimating to us that, before we commence with the questions, we should properly sanctify ourselves.

Two forms of questions arise. First, the word question itself is derived from the word, quest, which means to seek. A true questioner seeks an answer, an explanation. He makes an inquiry, because he truly wants to understand. Second, is the questioner who only seeks to challenge, to impugn, to oppose. He does not seek an answer; he already has the answers.

There was probably no period when our faith as a nation – both collective and individual faith -- was under greater duress than during and after the Holocaust. Mere words cannot describe the travail and the accompanying questions that were on the minds of those who suffered. Yet, many survived with their faith intact. They are the progenitors of this generation, and they were the ones whose example imbued us with the importance of *kadeish*, sanctify yourself.

We have no shortage of stories of faith connected to the Holocaust. I just came across two inspiring vignettes. It was the second night of *Pesach* in the Warsaw Ghetto, 1943. One bunker was still standing after days of destruction. This was the end. Tomorrow the Warsaw Ghetto would be history,

another notch on the collective gun belt of the Nazi war machine. One Jewish family was still alive on that night. Probably there will never be such a *Seder* – ever again. Moishele, the young child, began the *Mah Nishtanah*: “*Tatty*, why do we have to suffer so much – more than any other nation?” Moishele’s father had one answer: The standard answer that we all give, the one given by the *Baal Haggadah*: *Avadim hayinu l’Pharaoh b’Mitzrayim*; “We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt.” He continued with the discourse on Jewish history which demonstrates that there is a Divine Plan which guides our lives.

Moishele was not satisfied. He had another question – one more piercing than the first. “*Tatty*, will you be alive for the next *Seder* (next year) to answer my questions? (Furthermore), will I be alive to ask the questions? *Tatty* – will there be any Jews alive, anywhere in the world, to celebrate *Pesach* and ask the questions?”

When Moishele asked this question, silence reigned, both on earth and in Heaven. Everyone wept – on earth and in Heaven. It was the ultimate question; its poignancy was compelling. Moishele’s father was an emotionally strong man. This question tore at his heart. What could he tell his young innocent son? Then the answer came to him, almost as if Heaven sent: *Ki b’Shem Kodshecha nishbata lo shelo yichbeh neiro l’olam vaed*, “For by Your Holy Name You swore to him that his lamp will not be extinguished forever and ever.” His father said, “Moishele, I do not know if you will be alive, nor do I know if I will be alive, but one thing I know for certain: there will be a Moishele somewhere. There will always be a Moishele who will ask the questions, because the One and Only promised that there will always be a Moishele!”

It was 1942, in a small village in Poland. For some reason, the Nazis seemed to have forgotten about the Jews in the village. The residents were acutely aware of the roundups, the mass murders, the concentration camps. For some reason, however, they had been passed by-- until one day when the announcement came that all the Jews were to gather in the synagogue at twelve in the afternoon of the coming *Shabbos*. No one knew the meaning of this announcement with certainty, but, in the back of their minds, they had no doubt. Some escaped; others remained. They had nowhere to go. Running into the forest was not a choice. Staying at home was all they could do -- and wait. Perhaps they would be spared.

It was Monday when the announcement was made. The community’s elders convened a meeting of all the citizens to be held in the *shul*. Let everyone offer their voice. Perhaps they could come to a consensus of opinion. Many spoke and offered their suggestions. Suddenly, Yochanan the Tailor, a man who kept to himself, a man of few words, asked to be recognized. He had something to say: “My friends, would you like to know what I think? We have only a few more days to live. Tomorrow is Tuesday. Let us celebrate *Pesach*! On Wednesday, we will celebrate *Shavuot*. Thursday, we will celebrate *Succos*. We cannot leave this world without celebrating our *Yamim Tovim*, Festivals. They are a part of our lives. Friday will be our *Rosh Hashanah*, and *Shabbos*, the day that we are to convene in the *shul*, will be our *Yom Kippur*!

“Is there anyone in this *shul* who will exchange even one moment of his life to be like one of the Nazis? You would rather die a thousand deaths than live like one of them for a minute. Let our children know that we are spending our very last moments on this world celebrating the blessing of being Jewish!”

הן בני ישראל לא שמעו אל

Behold! Bnei Yisrael have not listened to me. (6:12)

Moshe *Rabbeinu* raised the issue of his inability to speak well. Furthermore, he thought that the people had lost confidence in him, because his earlier intercession with Pharaoh had catalyzed greater work for them. Nonetheless, despite *Klal Yisrael’s* probable unenthusiastic response to him, Hashem still sent Moshe to them. Why? If they would not listen, perhaps it would be best that he not come. We must remember that consecrated words do not simply go into oblivion. When someone of the calibre of Moshe speaks, his words are not wasted – ever. If they do not penetrate the ears of the subject upon whom he is focusing, they will one day be heard. The following vignette accentuates this idea.

Horav Yisrael, *zl*, *m’Vishnitz*, would take a stroll every *Erev Shabbos* in the accompaniment of his *gabbai*, aide. One Friday, his walk took him to the home of the manager of the bank, a Jew who had become victim to the baneful spiritual contamination wrought by the *Haskalah*, Enlightenment, as he had alienated himself from Jewish observance. Unlike many others, he did not maintain a malignant attitude towards his observant brothers; he simply lived his life as he saw fit, ignoring the comments of his compatriots. The *Rebbe* knocked on his door and was welcomed in by the butler. The *Rebbe* entered, and the butler showed him to a chair in the drawing room. Shocked that the *Rebbe* would visit him, the banker anxiously entered the room. He asked the *Rebbe* how he could be of assistance. The *Rebbe* did not respond. In fact, he just sat there, saying absolutely nothing. The banker asked one last time, inflecting his question with a bit more vigor, hoping to elicit a response.

This time the *Rebbe* replied, “I came here to perform a *mitzvah*, which I, *baruch Hashem*, have succeeded in carrying out.”

“Which *mitzvah* is that?” the banker asked. “Our sages teach that, just as it is a *mitzvah* to say what will be heard, it is likewise a *mitzvah* not to say what will not be heard.” (In other words, if someone will not listen, one should not say something to him.) Therefore, if I simply sit in your home and do not speak (because you will not listen to what I have to say), then I have fulfilled a *mitzvah*.”

“*Rebbe*, what is it that his honor wanted to say to me? Who says that I will not listen?” “No,” the *Rebbe* replied, “I know that you will not listen.”

The banker did not let up until the *Rebbe* finally divulged his message. “There is a widow living in abject poverty who owes a sum of money to your bank, which holds a mortgage on her small house. In a few days, the bank will foreclose on the house and sell it in a public sale, leaving the widow without a roof over her head. I wanted to ask you to dismiss the loan, but I said nothing, since it is a *mitzvah* not to say what will not be heard.”

“But, *Rebbe*, I am only a manager. I am not in charge of loans. It is not as if she owes the money personally to me. It is a bank loan, which is out of my purview.”

“That is exactly what I said. I knew that you would not want to help her.” The *Rebbe* arose from the chair and prepared to leave. The banker was beside himself, “What can I do? I am not in charge!” he declared (respectfully). The *Rebbe* said nothing (he had fulfilled his *mitzvah* by doing what had to be done). Finally, the banker was so shaken up that he removed a