

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Shemot

Exodus 1:1-6:1

Torah Reading for Week of December 22-28, 2002

Our Parshah opens by once more listing the names (*shemot*) of the sons of Jacob who came with him to Egypt, where "the children of Israel were fruitful, and proliferated, and multiplied, and grew very, very strong; and the land was filled with them."

As long as Jacob's sons were alive, the Children of Israel prospered in the land which Joseph had saved from starvation; but after the passing of Joseph and his brothers,

There arose a new king over Egypt, who knew not Joseph. And he said to his people: "Behold, the people of the children of Israel are more and mightier than we."

"Come, let us deal wisely with them; lest they multiply, and it come to pass that when any war should chance, they

also join our enemies, and fight against us..."

The Egyptian's way of dealing with their "Jewish problem" was to enslave the Jews. "They made their lives bitter with hard labor, in mortar and in brick, and in all manner of work in the field." And yet,

The more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew.

The king of Egypt summons two Jewish midwives, Shifrah and Puah, and commands them to kill all Jewish newborn males. When the midwives defy his instructions,

Pharaoh commanded all his people, saying: "Every son that is born you shall cast into the River, and every daughter you shall make live."

The Birth of Moses

There went a man of the house of Levi, and took to wife a daughter of Levi.

And the woman conceived, and bore a son. And she saw

Commentary

(Midrash Tanchuma; Rashi)

AND THESE ARE THE NAMES OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL WHO CAME INTO EGYPT: REUBEN, SHIMON, LEVI, AND JUDAH (EXODUS 1:1-2)

Although G-d had already counted them in their lifetime, He again counted them at the time of their death, to express His love for them. For they are like the stars, which He takes out and brings in by number and name; as it is written (Isaiah 40:26): "He takes out their hosts by number, He calls them each by name."

(Rashi)

AND JOSEPH DIED, AND ALL HIS BROTHERS, AND ALL THAT GENERATION (1:6)

Joseph, who lived 110 years, was the shortest-lived of the brothers; Levi, who lived 137, was the longest-lived. Hence, the enslavement of Israel, which began after Levi's death, was no longer than 116 years (the period from Levi's passing to the Exodus), and no shorter than 86, the age of Miriam at the time of the Exodus (Miriam, meaning "bitterness," was so named on account of the bitterness of the exile).

(Seder Olam)

"Loath positions of authority" (Ethics of the Fathers, 1:10), for they bury those who hold them. Was not Joseph among the youngest of his brothers? Yet he was the first of them to die.

(Avot d'Rabbi Natan)

AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL WERE FRUITFUL, AND PROLIFERATED, AND MULTIPLIED, AND GREW VERY, VERY STRONG (1:7)

They would give birth to six at a time (fruitful=1, proliferated=2, multiplied=3, grew strong=4, very=5, very=6).

AND THERE AROSE A NEW KING OVER EGYPT, WHO KNEW NOT JOSEPH (1:8)

Some say it was actually a new king; others say, it was the same king with new decrees. "Who knew not Joseph"—who acted as if he did not know Joseph (since, in either case, he surely knew about Joseph and his salvation of Egypt).

(Talmud; Rashi)

LET US DEAL WISELY WITH THEM (1:10)

Pharaoh himself took hold of a basket and shovel; all who saw Pharaoh with a basket and shovel working in bricks, did likewise. The Jews came, too, and diligently worked with him all day, for they were strong and brawny. When evening fell, Pharaoh placed taskmasters over them, and said: "Count how many bricks they made." He then said to the Hebrews: "This number you shall deliver to me each and every day," appointing the Egyptian taskmasters over Hebrew officers and the Hebrew officers over the people.

(Midrash Tanchuma)

THE MORE THEY AFFLICTED THEM, THE MORE THEY MULTIPLIED AND GREW (1:12)

Said Rabbi Akiva: In the merit of the righteous women of that generation were the Israelites delivered from Egypt.

At first, Pharaoh only insisted that they make the prescribed number of bricks each day. Then he commanded that they should not be allowed to sleep in their homes, so that they should not be able to have children. So the taskmasters said to them: "If you go home to sleep, you will lose a few hours each morning from your work, when we send for you, and you will never complete the allotted number." So they made them sleep on the ground out in the field.

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him that he was good; and she hid him three months.

When she could not longer hide him, she took for him a box made of papyrus, and daubed it with clay and with pitch, and put the child in it; and she laid it in the rushes by the River's brink.

The child's older sister, Miriam, stands watch from a distance, "to know what would be done to him."

And the daughter of Pharaoh came down to wash herself at the River. And she saw the box among the rushes, and she sent her maid to fetch it.

She opened it and she saw the child: behold, a weeping boy. And she had compassion on him, and said, "This is one of the children of the Hebrews."

Miriam approaches and offers the services of a Hebrew nurse-maid. When Pharaoh's daughter accepts, Miriam brings Jocheved, the child's own mother, whom Pharaoh's daughter

hires to nurse and care for the child. When the child grows older, he is returned to Pharaoh's daughter, who raises him as her son. She calls him Moses, "he who was drawn from the water."

Flight From Egypt

And it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown, that he went out to his brothers, and looked on their suffering; and he saw an Egyptian smiting a Hebrew, one of his brothers.

He looked this way and that, and when he saw that there was no man, he slew the Egyptian, and hid him in the sand.

But not only Egyptians were doing the smiting. The next day, Moses encounters two Jews fighting. "Why will you smite your fellow?" he demands of the attacker.

"Who made you prince and a judge over us?" comes the reply. "Do you say to kill me, as you killed the Egyptian?"

And Moses feared, and said: "Indeed, the thing is known."

Moses' fear materializes: word reaches Pharaoh, and Moses is sentenced to death. Moses flees to the land of Midian.

In Midian, Moses sits by a well. The daughters of Jethro, the priest of Midian, come to draw water for their father's flocks

Commentary

What did the daughters of Israel do? They would go down to draw water from the river, and G-d would send them small fish into pitchers, which they drew up half full of water and half full of fish. They then set two pots on the fire, one for hot water and the other for the fish. They sold the fish and bought wine, which they carried to their husbands in the field, and washed, annointed, fed, gave them to drink. They would then take out their mirrors and look into them with their husbands, teasing them, "Look, I am more beautiful than you" thus arousing their desire and cohabiting with them among the sheepfolds, as it is written: "When ye lie among the sheepfolds" (Psalms 68:14). (It was these mirrors which G-d later commanded Moses to use in the making of the washstand in the Sanctuary — see Exodus 38:8)..

After the women had conceived they returned to their homes; and when the time of childbirth arrived, they went and were delivered in the field beneath the apple trees, as it is written: "Under the apple-tree I brought you forth" (Song of Songs 5:5). G-d sent an angel from the high heavens who washed and straightened the limbs [of the babes] in the same manner that a midwife straightens the limbs of a child; as it is said: "And as for your nativity, in the day that you were born your navel was not cut, neither were you washed in water to cleanse you" (Ezekiel 16:4). He also provided for them two round stones, one for oil and one for honey, as it is said: "And He made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil from a boulder" (Deuteronomy 32:13).

When the Egyptians noticed them, they went to kill them; but a miracle occurred and [the children] were swallowed in the ground. The Egyptians brought oxen and ploughed over them, as it is said: "The ploughers ploughed upon my back" (Psalms 129:3). After they had departed, they broke through the earth and came forth like the herbage of the field, as it is said: "I caused you to multiply as the bud of the field" (Ezekiel 16:7). When the children had grown up, they came in flocks to their homes. When G-d

revealed Himself by the Red Sea, these children recognised Him first, as it is said: "This is my G-d and I will praise Him" (Exodus 15:2).

(Midrash Tanchuma; Talmud, Sotah 11b)

THE MORE THEY AFFLICTED THEM, THE MORE THEY MULTIPLIED AND GREW (1:12)

What is the meaning of the verse (Jeremiah 11:16) in which the Jewish people are called "a leafy olive tree, fair with goodly fruit"? Just as the olive is marked out for shriveling while it is yet on its tree, after which it is brought down from the tree and beaten, and after it has been beaten is brought up to the vat and placed in a grinding-mill, where it is ground and then tied up with ropes, and then stones are brought, and then at last it yields its oil, so it is with Israel: the heathens come and beat them about from place to place, imprison them and bind them in chains, and surround them with officers, and then at last do Israel repent and G-d answers them.

(Midrash Rabbah)

PHARAOH COMMANDED ALL HIS PEOPLE, SAYING: "EVERY SON THAT IS BORN YOU SHALL CAST INTO THE RIVER" (1:22)

He imposed the same decree upon his own people. Said Rabbi Yose ben Rabbi Chaninah: He made three decrees. First, [he instructed the midwives,] "If it be a son, then you shall kill him"; then he commanded, "Every [Hebrew] son that is born you shall cast into the river"; and finally, "Pharaoh commanded all his people," imposing the same decree upon his own people.

(Talmud, Sotah 12a)

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and are driven away by shepherds; Moses comes to their aid. Moses is subsequently invited to Jethro's home, and marries one of the daughters, Zipporah. A son is born to them and named Gershom, "Because I was a stranger (*ger*) in a foreign land".

In the meantime, the lot of the Children of Israel in Egypt worsens, "and their cry rose up to G-d out of their bondage."

At the Burning Bush

Moses was shepherding the sheep of Jethro; and he led the flock far away into the desert, and came to the mountain of G-d, to Horeb.

And the angel of G-d appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a thornbush; and he looked, and, behold, the bush burned with fire, but the bush was not consumed.

And Moses said: "I must turn aside, and see this great sight, why the bush is not burnt."

And G-d called to him out of the midst of the bush, and said: "Moses! Moses!" And he said, "Here I am."

And He said: "Do not come near; remove your shoes from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground.

"I am the G-d of your father, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac, and the G-d of Jacob."

And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon G-d.

And G-d said: "I have surely seen the affliction of My people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cries at the hand of their oppressors, I know their pain..."

"Come now therefore, and I will send you to Pharaoh, that you shall bring My people the children of Israel out of Egypt."

"Who am I," objects Moses, "that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

Commentary

EVERY SON THAT IS BORN YOU SHALL CAST INTO THE RIVER, AND EVERY DAUGHTER YOU SHALL MAKE LIVE (1:22)

Pharaoh did not merely allow the Jewish girls to live; he commanded to "make them live" (*techayun*, in the Hebrew).

Pharaoh's decree of annihilation against the Jewish people consisted of two parts: to throw every Jewish newborn male into the Nile, and to make live every female. The boys were to be physically murdered. The girls were to be murdered spiritually by making them live the Egyptian life, by indoctrinating them into the perverse lifestyle of Egypt.

The boys were to be drowned in the Nile. The girls, too, were to be drowned in the Nile - conceptually, if not actually. The Nile, which irrigated the fields of rain-parched Egypt, was the mainstay of its economy and its most venerated god. The girls were to be raised in this cult of the river, their souls submerged in a way of life that deifies the earthly vehicle of material sustenance.

In our own day, the Pharaoh-instituted practice of drowning children in the Nile is still with us: there are still parents whose highest consideration in choosing a school for their children is how it will further their child's economic prospects when the time will come for him or her to enter the job market.

The people of Israel survived the Egyptian *galut* because there were Jewish mothers who refused to comply with Pharaoh's decree to submerge their children in his river. If we are to survive the present *galut*, we, too, must resist the dictates of the current Pharaohs. We must set the spiritual and moral development of our children rather than their future "earning power" and "careers" as the aim of their education.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

THERE WENT A MAN OF THE HOUSE OF LEVI, AND TOOK TO WIFE A DAUGHTER OF LEVI (2:1)

Where did he go? He went in the counsel of his daughter.

Moses' father, Amram, was the greatest man of his generation; when he saw that the wicked Pharaoh had decreed "Every son that is born you shall cast into the river," he said: In vain do we labor. He went and divorced his wife. All the Israelites thereupon arose and divorced their wives.

Said his daughter to him: "Father, your decree is more severe than Pharaoh's. Pharaoh decreed only against the males; you have decreed against the males and females. Pharaoh only decreed concerning this world; you have decreed concerning this world and the World to Come. In the case of the wicked Pharaoh there is a doubt whether his decree will be fulfilled or not; in your case, it will certainly be fulfilled." So Amram went and remarried his wife; and they all arose and took back their wives.

"And he took to wife" it should have read "and he took back"! Said Rabbi Judah ben Zebina: He acted towards her as though it had been the first marriage. He seated her in a palanquin, Aaron and Miriam danced before her, and the Ministering Angels proclaimed: "A joyful mother of children."

Why is she called "a daughter of Levi"? She was one hundred and thirty years old! Because the signs of maidenhood were reborn in her.

(Talmud, Sotah 12a)

AND SHE SAW HIM THAT HE WAS GOOD (2:2)

At the time when Moses was born, the whole house was filled with light. For it is written here, "And she saw him that he was good," and elsewhere it is written (Genesis 1:4), "And G-d saw the light that it was good."

(Talmud, Sotah 12a)

AND SHE LAID IT IN THE RUSHES BY THE RIVER'S BRINK (2:3)

Why did she put Moses in the River? So that Pharaoh's astrologers should

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"I will be with you," answers G-d, and tells Moses the ultimate goal of the Exodus: "When you bring the people out of Egypt, you shall serve G-d upon this mountain" (upon which the people of Israel will receive the Torah).

Says Moses: "When I come to the Children of Israel, and say to them, 'The G-d of your fathers has sent me to you,' they will say to me: 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?"

*And G-d said to Moses: "I am who I am." And He said: "Thus shall you say to the children of Israel: **Eheyeh** ('I am') has sent me to you."*

G-d then gives Moses detailed directions on how to proceed and how the Exodus will come about:

Go and gather the elders of Israel together, and say to them: "G-d, the G-d of your fathers, has appeared to me, saying: I have surely remembered ("pakod pakadati") you, and have seen that which is done to you in Egypt. And I have said: I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanite, to a land flowing with milk and honey."

And they will hearken to your voice. And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt, and you shall say to him: "G-d, the G-d of the Hebrews has met with us; and now let us go, we entreat you, three days' journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to G-d..."

And I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go, not by a mighty hand. And I will stretch out My hand and smite Egypt with all my wonders which I will do in their midst, and after that he will let you go.

And when you go, you shall not go empty: every woman shall ask of her neighbor, and of her that sojourns in her house, jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and garments

Commentary

think that he has already been cast into the Nile, and not search for him.

(Midrash Rabbah)

[PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER] SAW THE BOX AMONG THE RUSHES, AND SHE SENT HER MAID ("AMMATAH") TO FETCH IT (2:5)

Another interpretation of this verse renders the Hebrew word *ammatah* as "her arm" rather than "her maid." *Ammatah* also means "arm lengths." This is to teach us that "her arm was extended for many arm-lengths" (to enable her to reach the basket).

(Talmud; Rashi)

If Moses' basket lay beyond her reach, why did Pharaoh's daughter extend her arm? Could she possibly have anticipated the miracle that her hand would be "extended for many arm-lengths"?

There is a profound lesson here for each and every one of us. Often, we are confronted with a situation that is beyond our capacity to rectify. Someone or something is crying out for our help, but there is nothing we can do: by all natural criteria, the matter is simply beyond our reach. So we resign ourselves to inactivity, reasoning that the little we *can* do won't change matters anyway.

But Pharaoh's daughter heard a child's cry and extended her arm. An unbridgeable distance lay between her and the basket containing the weeping infant, making her action seem utterly pointless. But because she did the maximum of which she was capable, she achieved the impossible. Because she extended her arm, G-d extended its reach, enabling her to save a life and raise the greatest human being ever to walk the face of the earth.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

SHE OPENED IT AND SHE SAW THE CHILD: BEHOLD, A WEEPING BOY. AND SHE SAID, "THIS IS ONE OF THE CHILDREN OF THE HEBREWS" (2:6)

She *saw* him weeping, but did not hear him; thus she knew it was a Hebrew

child. For only a Jew can weep soundlessly.

(Rabbi Bunim of Otzwotzk)

AND SHE CALLED HIS NAME MOSES (2:10)

From here you can infer how great is the reward of those who perform acts of kindness. For although Moses had many names, the name by which he is known throughout the Torah is the one which Batyah, the daughter of Pharaoh, called him, and even G-d called him by no other name.

(Midrash Rabbah)

HE WENT OUT TO HIS BROTHERS, AND LOOKED ON THEIR SUFFERING (2:11)

He saw great burdens put upon small people and light burdens upon big people, and a man's burden upon a woman and a woman's burden upon a man, and the burden which an old man could carry on a youth, and of a youth on an old man. So he left his suite and rearranged their burdens, pretending all the time to be helping Pharaoh. G-d then said to him: "You have put aside your affairs and have gone to share the sorrow of Israel, behaving to them like a brother; I too, will leave those on high and below and speak only with you."

Moses saw that they had no rest, so he went to Pharaoh and said: "If one has a slave and he does not give him rest one day in the week, the slave dies." Said Pharaoh: "Go and do with them as you say." Thereupon Moses ordained for them the Sabbath day for rest.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND HE LOOKED THIS WAY AND THAT, AND WHEN HE SAW THAT THERE WAS NO MAN (2:12)

He saw that there was no hope that any righteous person would arise from him or his offspring until the end of generations.

(Midrash Rabbah)

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and you shall despoil Egypt.

But they won't believe me that You indeed appeared to me, says Moses. G-d responds by giving him a number of supernatural "signs" to perform: Moses' staff turns into a serpent and back to a stick; his hand becomes covered with leprosy, and is miraculously healed. If these two signs do not suffice, says G-d, take water from the Nile, and it will turn to blood.

Moses has a further objection: "O my G-d, I am not a man of words, also not yesterday, also not the day before, also not since You have spoken to Your servant; but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue."

Commentary

AND HE SLEW THE EGYPTIAN (2:12)

How did he slay him? Rabbi Abyatar said: With his fist. Others say that he took a clay shovel and cracked his skull. The Rabbis say that he pronounced G-d's name against him and thus slew him; thus [the Hebrew he saw fighting the next day] said to him, "Do you say to kill me?"

(Midrash Rabbah)

TWO MEN OF THE HEBREWS FIGHTING (2:13)

These were Datan and Aviram (who were yet to cause much trouble for Moses - see Exodus 16:20 and Numbers 16).

(Rashi)

AND HE SAID TO THE WICKED ONE: "WHY WOULD YOU SMITE YOUR FELLOW?" (2:13)

Said Resh Lakish: He who lifts his hand against his fellow, even if he did not smite him, is called wicked; as it is written: "And he said to the wicked one: Why would you smite your fellow?" It does not say, "Why did you smite," but, "Why would you smite," indicating that though he had not smitten him yet, he was termed a "wicked one."

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 58b)

AND MOSES FEARED, AND SAID: "INDEED, THE THING IS KNOWN" (2:14)

Moses was meditating in his heart: "In what have Israel sinned, that they should be enslaved more than all the nations?" When he heard their words, he said: "Tale-bearing is rife among them, and how can they be ripe for salvation?" Thus he proclaimed, "Indeed the thing is known"—now I know the cause of their bondage.

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

To which G-d responds:

"Who has made man's mouth? Who makes a man dumb, or deaf, or seeing, or blind? Is it not I G-d? Now therefore go, and I will be with your mouth, and teach you what you should say."

Still, Moses persists in his refusal to take on the mission of redeeming Israel from exile. "O please, my G-d!" he cries. "Send by the hand of him whom you shall send!"

And the anger of G-d burned against Moses, and He said: "Is not Aaron the Levite your brother? I know that he can speak well. Behold, he comes to meet you, and when he sees you, he will be glad in his heart; he shall be your spokesman to the people"

"And you shall take this staff in your hand, with which you shall perform the signs."

"Let My People Go"

Moses places his wife and sons on "the donkey" and sets out for Egypt. On the way, he is nearly killed when they stop for the night; his life is spared only when Zipporah circumcises their

AND MOSES DWELLED IN THE LAND OF MIDIAN; AND HE SAT BY A WELL (2:15)

He took his example from Jacob, who found his wife by the well.

(Rashi)

AND THE PRIEST OF MIDIAN HAD SEVEN DAUGHTERS; AND THEY CAME TO WATER THEIR FATHER'S FLOCK (2:16)

Jethro was at first a priest to idolatrous worship; but when he saw that there was no truth in it, he summoned his townsmen and said: "Hitherto I ministered unto you, but now I have become old; choose another priest." And he returned unto them all the insignia of his priesthood. Whereupon they excommunicated him, that no man be in his company, or work for him or tend his flock; he asked the shepherds to look after his flock, but they refused, and he had to employ his daughters.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND IT CAME TO PASS IN THE COURSE OF THOSE MANY DAYS, THAT THE KING OF EGYPT DIED; AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL GROANED BY REASON OF THE BONDAGE (2:23)

He didn't actually die, but was afflicted with leprosy, and his physicians said to him that his only cure is to slaughter Hebrew children—150 in the morning and 150 in the evening—and bath in their blood twice a day.

(Midrash Rabbah; Rashi)

AND THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL GROANED BY REASON OF THE BONDAGE (2:23)

Until this point, the Children of Israel were so deeply sunk in their *galut* that they could not even sense it. But now, when the first budding of their redemption began to emerge, they could begin to feel the depth of their suffering.

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son.

G-d appears to Aaron and sends him to the desert to meet Moses. In Egypt, the brothers assemble the elders of Israel. Aaron conveys the message of redemption from G-d, and Moses performs the signs. "And the people believed."

After that, Moses and Aaron came and said to Pharaoh: "Thus says G-d, G-d of Israel: Let My people go, that they may observe a festival for Me in the wilderness."

And Pharaoh said: "Who is G-d, that I should obey his voice and let Israel go? I know not G-d, nor will I let Israel go."

Not only does Pharaoh refuse their demand—he increases the burden of labor on his Hebrew slaves, commanding their

taskmasters:

"You shall no longer give the people straw to make brick, as before: let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the quantity of the bricks, which they did make heretofore, you shall lay upon them; you shall not diminish naught of it."

When the Jewish officers complain to Moses that his visit to Pharaoh has only made things worse, he can bear it no longer:

And Moses returned to G-d and said: "My G-d, why have You done evil to this nation?! Why have You sent me?!"

"For since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done worse to this nation; and You have not saved Your people"

And G-d said to Moses: "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh; for with a strong hand shall he let them go, and with a strong hand shall he drive them out of his land."

Commentary

(Chidushei HaRim)

AND MOSES WAS SHEPHERDING THE SHEEP OF JETHRO (3:1)

G-d tests the righteous. How does He try them? With sheep.

He tried David through sheep and found him to be a good shepherd, as it is written (Psalms 77:70), "He chose also David His servant, and took him from the sheepfolds." As a shepherd, David would bring the smallest sheep out first, so that they should graze upon the tender grass; then he allowed the old sheep to feed from the ordinary grass; lastly, he brought forth the young, lusty sheep to eat the tougher grass. Whereupon G-d said: He who knows how to look after sheep, bestowing upon each the care it deserves, shall come and tend my people.

Also Moses was tested by G-d through sheep. Our Rabbis relate that when Moses was tending the flock of Jethro in the wilderness, a little kid escaped from him. He ran after it until it reached a shady place. When it reached the shady place, there appeared to view a pool of water and the kid stopped to drink. When Moses approached it, he said: "I did not know that you ran away because of thirst; you must be weary." So he placed the kid on his shoulder and walked back. Thereupon G-d said: Because you were merciful in leading the flock of a mortal, you shall tend My flock, the people of Israel.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND HE CAME TO THE MOUNTAIN OF G-D, TO HOREB (3:1)

The mountain had five names: The Mountain of G-d, Mount Bashan, the Mountain of Peaks, Mount Horeb, and Mount Sinai.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THE ANGEL OF G-D APPEARED TO HIM IN A FLAME OF FIRE OUT OF THE MIDST OF A THORNBUSH (3:2)

Why in a thornbush and not some other tree? In order to demonstrate that "I am with them in their affliction."

(Rashi)

THE BUSH BURNED WITH FIRE, BUT THE BUSH WAS NOT CONSUMED (3:2)

Moses had thought to himself that the Egyptians might consume Israel. So G-d showed him a fire which burned but did not consume, saying to him: "Just as the thornbush is burning and is not consumed, so the Egyptians will not be able to destroy Israel."

(Midrash Rabbah)

At Sinai, Moses beheld the heart of the simple Jew.

"Man is a tree of field." (Deuteronomy 20:19). But the field has many types of trees. The Talmud compares the righteous Torah scholars to fruit trees, which bestow beauty, fragrance and nourishment upon the world. The fruit trees also burn — they burn with the ecstasy of their Torah study, with the fervor of their prayer, with the warmth of their good deeds. But theirs is a fire that burns and burns out, a fire that is sated by the words of Torah and prayer and the fulfillment of the divine will.

But the thornbush burns with a fire that is never satisfied. The simple Jew, who cannot fathom the depths of Torah, who can barely articulate his prayers, who has little understanding of the significance of a mitzvah — his is a thirst never quenched. His heart burns with a yearning for G-d he can never hope to still, with a love he can never hope to consummate..

When Moses, the most perfect of men, beheld the heart of flame that smol-

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ders within the thornbush, he was humbled by the sight. "I must *turn aside* to see this great sight," he said: I must move from where I am and strive to awaken in myself the insatiable fire of the simple Jew.

(Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov)

AND G-D CALLED TO HIM OUT OF THE MIDST OF THE BUSH: "I AM THE G-D OF YOUR FATHER" (3:4-6)

G-d first called to Moses in the voice of Amram his father, so as not to startle him. At that moment Moses rejoiced, saying, "My father still lives." Said G-d: "I am not your father, but the G-d of your father."

(Midrash Tanchuma)

AND MOSES HID HIS FACE; FOR HE WAS AFRAID TO LOOK UPON G-D (3:6)

Rabbi Joshua ben Korchah and Rabbi Hoshai discussed this. The first said: Moses did not do well in hiding his face, for had he not done so, G-d would have revealed to him what is above and what is below, what has happened and what will happen.

Rabbi Hoshai the Elder said: Moses did well in hiding his face. Said G-d to him: Since you showed Me respect and hid your face when I would show Myself to you, I assure you that you will be near Me on the mountain for forty days and forty nights, in which you will not eat nor drink, but feast on the splendor of the Divine Presence.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND MOSES SAID TO G-D: "WHO AM I, THAT I SHOULD GO TO PHARAOH?" AND HE SAID: "THIS IS YOUR SIGN THAT I HAVE SENT YOU" (3:11-12)

This itself—your humility—is the reason why I have chosen you.

(Anei Azel)

The story is told of two brothers, both disciples of the Rebbe of Lublin, who served as Chassidic rebbes. One enjoyed a large following, while the other had few disciples.

Said the second brother to the first: "I don't understand. We are both disciples of our late master; we are both equally great in learning and piety; so why do so few Chassidim come to me, while so many seek you out?"

Replied the other: "I, too, ask the same question: Why do they come to me instead of to you? But it seems, my brother, that in both our cases, our question is also the answer. They don't come to you because you can't understand why they don't come to you; and they come to me because I can't understand why they come to me."

(Maayanah Shel Torah)

AND G-D SAID TO MOSES: "I AM WHO I AM." AND HE SAID: "THUS SHALL

YOU SAY TO THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL: 'I AM' HAS SENT ME TO YOU" (3:14)

G-d said to Moses: "Go and say to Israel: 'I am' with you in this servitude, and 'I am' with you in the servitude of the other kingdoms."

Said Moses to G-d: "Master of the Universe! It is enough that they deal with each trouble in its time!" (I.e., why speak to them now of their future subjugations?)

Said G-d: "You have spoken well. Go and tell them: 'I am' has sent me to you."

(Talmud; Rashi)

G-d said to Moses: You want to know My name? I am called by My deeds. I might be called *E-l Sha-dai*, or *Tzevakot*, or *Elokim*, or *HaVaYaH*. When I judge My creatures, I am called *Elokim*. When I wage war on the wicked, I am called *Tzevakot*. When I tolerate the sins of man, I am called *E-l Sha-dai*. When I have compassion on My world, I am called *Ha-Va-Ya-H...*"

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND G-D SAID TO HIM "CAST [YOUR STAFF] ON THE GROUND" AND IT TURNED INTO A SNAKE... AND HE PUT HIS HAND INTO HIS BOSOM AND HIS HAND WAS LEPROUS, AS WHITE AS SNOW (4:2-6)

G-d was indicating to Moses that he acted wrongly in saying that the people of Israel will not believe. The snake is an allusion to the primordial serpent, who was punished for his evil talk; leprosy is the punishment for slander.

(Midrash; Rashi)

Man was created to do, achieve and create. If his hand is indolently resting in his bosom, it is dead flesh.

(Malbim)

"I AM SLOW OF SPEECH, AND OF A SLOW TONGUE" (4:10)

When Moses was a child in the royal palace Pharaoh would take him on his lap to kiss and hug him, and Moses used to take the crown of Pharaoh and place it upon his own head.

The magicians of Egypt sat there and said: "We fear that this is the one of whom we prophesy that he will take away the kingdom from you." Some of them counseled to slay him and others to burn him, but Jethro was present among them and he said to them: "This boy has no sense. However, test him by placing before him a gold vessel and a live coal; if he stretches forth his hand for the gold, then he has sense and you can slay him, but if he makes for the live coal, then he has no sense and there can be no sentence of death upon him." So they brought these things before him, and he was about to reach forth for the gold when the angel Gabriel came and thrust his hand aside so that it seized the coal; Moses thrust his hand with the live coal into his mouth, so that his tongue was burnt, with the result that he became slow of speech and of tongue.

(Midrash Rabbah)

Moses was afflicted with a speech impairment so that no one should think that his success in transmitting the Torah to the world was due to his oratory skills. Rather, it derived solely from the fact that "the divine presence spoke from his throat."

(Derashot HaRan)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Shemot

Exodus 1:1-6:1

Torah Reading for Week of December 22-28, 2002

Commentary

AND MOSES SAID TO G-D: "O MY G-D, I AM NOT A MAN OF WORDS, ALSO NOT YESTERDAY, ALSO NOT THE DAY BEFORE, ALSO NOT SINCE YOU ARE SPEAKING TO YOUR SERVANT..." (4:10)

For seven days G-d was persuading Moses at the bush to go in His mission. "Yesterday," "the day before" and "since You are speaking" are three days; three times "also" indicate another three days; thus Moses was standing on the seventh day when he said "O please, my G-d! Send by the hand of him whom you shall send!"

(Rashi)

"O PLEASE, MY G-D! SEND BY THE HAND OF HIM WHOM YOU SHALL SEND!" (4:13)

Said Moses: I know that I am not destined to take them into the Land and to be their Future Redeemer. You have other messengers—send them!!

(Rashi)

AND THE ANGER OF G-D BURNED AGAINST MOSES; AND HE SAID: "IS NOT AARON THE LEVITE YOUR BROTHER?" (4:14)

Rabbi Joshua ben Karchah said: A lasting effect is recorded of every instance of divine anger in the Torah, but no lasting effect is recorded in this case.

Rabbi Shimon bar Yochai said: A lasting effect is recorded in this instance too, for it says, "Is there not Aaron the Levite your brother?" But wasn't Aaron a Kohen (priest)? However, originally Moses was to be the Kohen and Aaron the Levite, and their roles were reversed.

(Talmud, Zevachim 102b)

AND WHEN [AARON] SEES YOU, HE WILL BE GLAD IN HIS HEART (4:14)

Not, as you thought, that he would be jealous of your ascension to the leadership. In the merit of this, Aaron was granted the *Choshen* (priestly breast-plate) worn on the heart.

(Rashi)

AND YOU SHALL TAKE THIS STAFF IN YOUR HAND, WITH WHICH YOU SHALL DO THE SIGNS (4:17)

This staff was created at twilight of the sixth day of creation and was given to Adam in the Garden of Eden. Adam gave it to Enoch, Enoch to Noah, Noah to Abraham, Abraham to Isaac and Isaac to Jacob. Jacob brought it with him to Egypt and gave it to Joseph. When Joseph died his house was despoiled and the staff ended up in Pharaoh's palace. Jethro, who was one

of Pharaoh's soothsayers, saw the staff with the mysterious markings on it and coveted it; he took it and planted it in the garden of his home, and no man was able to come close to it.

When Moses came to Jethro's house, he entered the garden and saw the staff and read the markings on it; he reached out his hand and plucked it from the ground. When Jethro saw this, he proclaimed, "This man shall redeem the people of Israel from Egypt," and gave him his daughter Zipporah as a wife.

(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 40)

AND MOSES TOOK HIS WIFE AND HIS SONS AND SET THEM UPON THE DONKEY, AND HE RETURNED TO THE LAND OF EGYPT (4:20)

This is the very donkey which Abraham saddled for the Binding of Isaac, and this is the very donkey upon which the Messiah is destined to be revealed, as it is written (Zechariah 9:9), "A pauper, riding upon the donkey."

(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer; Rashi)

AND IT CAME TO PASS ON THE WAY THAT G-D MET HIM AND SOUGHT TO KILL HIM. ZIPPORAH TOOK A SHARP STONE AND CUT OFF THE FORESKIN OF HER SON, AND CAST IT AT HIS FEET (4:24-25)

Because Moses was lax in circumcising his (second) son, Eliezer, an angel came to kill him.

(Rashi)

Jethro had made this a condition of his marriage with Zipporah - that half their sons would be circumcised, and the other half would not.

(Midrash Agadah)

AND G-D SAID TO AARON: "GO TO THE WILDERNESS TO MEET MOSES." AND HE WENT, AND MET HIM IN THE MOUNT OF G-D, AND KISSED HIM (4:27)

This is what the verse (Psalms 85:11) refers to when it says, "Benevolence and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed." "Benevolence" this is Aaron; "truth" this is Moses. "Righteousness" is Moses; "peace" is Aaron.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THE PEOPLE BELIEVED; AND THEY HEARD THAT G-D HAD REMEMBERED THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL (4:31)

The people of Israel were redeemed from Egypt only in the merit of their faith, as it is written, "And the people believed."

(Mechilta)

When Moses said to G-d, "But they will not believe me," G-d said to him: They are believers, the children of believers, whereas you will ultimately disbelieve. They are believers, as it is written, "And the people believed"; they are the children of believers, as it is written (Genesis 15:6), "and [Abraham] believed in G-d"; and you will ultimately disbelieve, as it is written (Numbers 20:12): "And G-d said to Moses and Aaron: Because you believed not in Me"

(Talmud, Shabbat 97a)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

Shemot

Exodus 1:1-6:1

Torah Reading for Week of December 22-28, 2002

Commentary

The letters (which held the secret of the redemption) were given over only to Abraham; Abraham gave them over to Isaac, Isaac gave them to Jacob, and Jacob to Joseph. Joseph transmitted them to his brothers, while Asher the son of Jacob handed them down the secret to his daughter Serach.

When Moses and Aaron came and performed the miraculous signs before the elders of Israel, the elders went to Serach and said to her: "A man has come and performed such and such signs."

Said she to them: "These signs don't mean anything."

Said they to her: "But he said, *pakod pakadati* ('I have surely remembered')."

Said she to them: "This is the man who will redeem the people of Israel from Egypt."

(Pirkei d'Rabbi Eliezer, ch. 40)

AFTER THAT, MOSES AND AARON CAME AND SAID TO PHARAOH (5:1)

Where had the elders gone? They are not mentioned here, though G-d had said to Moses, "And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel, to the king of Egypt."

Our Sages explained that the elders did indeed go with them, but stole away furtively, singly or in pairs, so that by the time they reached the palace of Pharaoh, not one of them was there.

For this reason, when Moses and Aaron went up with the elders to Mount Sinai to receive the Torah, G-d turned them back, as it says (Exodus 24:14): "And unto the elders he said: Wait here for us."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND PHARAOH SAID: "WHO IS G-D?" (5:2)

That day was Pharaoh's day for the reception of ambassadors, when all the kings came to pay him honor, bringing with them gifts of crowns with which they crowned him lord of the world, and also their idols did they bring with them.

After they had crowned him, Pharaoh's servants came and said: "Two old men are at the gate."

When Moses and Aaron entered, Pharaoh asked them, "Who are you?"

"We are the ambassadors of G-d, blessed be He."

"What do you want?"

"Thus says G-d, G-d of Israel: Let My people go, that they may observe a festival for Me in the wilderness."

"Has he not the sense to send me a crown, that you come to me with mere words? Wait, while I search in my records."

Pharaoh went into his palace chamber and scrutinized every nation and its gods, beginning with the gods of Moab, Ammon, and Zidon. He then said to them: "I have searched for his name throughout my archives, but have not found him. Is he young or old? How many cities has he captured? How many provinces has he subdued? How long is it since He ascended the throne?"

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THE KING OF EGYPT SAID TO THEM: "WHY DO YOU, MOSES AND AARON, DISTRACT THE PEOPLE FROM THEIR WORK? GO OFF TO YOUR LABORS" (5:4)

It was the custom for every nation to have its clergy, the teachers of its faith. For this reason, Pharaoh absolved the tribe of Levi from forced labor, recognizing them as the sages and elders of the Jewish people... Thus Pharaoh said to Moses and Aaron "Go off to *your* labors," as the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt did not include the tribe of Levi.

(Nachmanides)

AND THE OFFICERS OF THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, WHOM PHARAOH'S TASKMASTERS HAD SET OVER THEM, WERE BEATEN, SAYING: WHY HAVE YOU NOT FULFILLED YOUR QUOTA IN MAKING BRICK? (5:14)

These Israelite officers were worthy men who jeopardized their lives for Israel, bearing the blows of the Egyptians so that Israel's task might be lighter. For this merit they were subsequently endowed with the holy spirit, as G-d later instructs Moses (Numbers 6:16): "Gather unto Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people, and officers over them." Said G-d: Since they were beaten for Israel's sakes, therefore they will merit the holy spirit and be appointed as prophets over them.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND THEY SAID TO [MOSES AND AARON]: "YOU HAVE MADE US ABHORRENT IN THE EYES OF PHARAOH AND IN THE EYES OF HIS SERVANTS, TO PUT A SWORD IN THEIR HAND TO SLAY US" (5:21)

They said to Moses: "To what are we compared? To a lamb which a wolf comes to devour, and then a shepherd comes to wrest it from the jaws of the wolf. Between the shepherd and the wolf, the lamb is torn in two." Thus did Israel say: Moses, between you and Pharaoh, we are dying.

(Midrash Rabbah)

And G-d said to Moses: "Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh (6:1)

G-d said to Moses: Because you questioned My ways, "Now you shall see"—what is now done to Pharaoh you will witness, but you will not live to see what I will do to the kings of the Seven Nations when I bring Israel into the Land..

(Rashi; Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a)

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

MOSES: THE BIRTH OF A LEADER

The Parshah of Shemot is the story of a *galut* - of the exile and enslavement of the Children of Israel in Egypt, which our sages regard as the father and prototype of all subsequent exiles and persecutions of the Jewish people. It is also the story of the making of the quintessential Jewish leader, Moses.

Everything the Torah tells us about Moses is a lesson in Jewish leadership. We are told that Moses' mother, Jocheved, was born "between the boundary walls" of Egypt when Jacob's family first arrived there. This, explains the Lubavitcher Rebbe, means that Jocheved belongs neither to the "old generation" born in the Holy Land, to whom *galut* will always be a foreign and unknowable world; nor is she of the generation born in Egypt, to whom the state of exile is a most natural and obvious fact of life. Rather, she straddles both these worlds, meaning that she has intimate knowledge of the circumstance of *galut* as well as the transcendent vision to supercede it. So Jocheved is the woman in whose womb could be formed, and under whose tutelage could develop, the one who could redeem the Children of Israel from their exile.

The circumstances of Moses' birth are a lesson in the selflessness demanded of the leader. Jocheved and Amram had separated when Pharaoh decreed that all newborn Hebrew males be cast in the Nile. Their eldest daughter, Miriam, rebuked them: "Your decree is worse than Pharaoh's: Pharaoh decreed to annihilate the males, and your action shall spell the end of all Jewish children." Amram and Jocheved realized that, as leaders whose actions will be emulated by others, they had to rise above the personal danger and anguish involved in fathering Jewish children in these terrible times. The result of their remarriage was the birth of Moses.

Infancy and Childhood

When Moses is born, the "house was filled with light" attesting to his future as the enlightener of humanity. But right away this light has to be hidden, for he, as all Hebrew newborn males, lives in perpetual fear of discovery by Pharaoh's baby killers. Then he is placed in the Nile, precariously protected

only by a reed basket, sharing, if only in potential, the fate of his fellow babes cast into its waters.

Here we have a further lesson in leadership: the leader cannot appear from "above," but must share the fate of his people. This was the lesson which G-d Himself conveyed by first appearing to Moses in a thornbush: "I am with them in their affliction."

But Moses' placement in the Nile was not only a demonstration of empathy with the plight of Israel: it was also the first stage of their salvation. Our sages tell us that Pharaoh ordered all Hebrew male babies to be cast into the Nile because his astrologers told him that the savior of Israel will meet his end by water (this prediction was fulfilled many years later when Moses was prevented from entering the Holy Land because of the "Waters of Strife"). On the day that Moses was placed in the Nile, Pharaoh's astrologers informed him that the one destined to redeem the people of Israel has already been cast into the water, and the decree was revoked. As a three-month-old infant, seemingly a passive participant in the events surrounding him, Moses was already fulfilling his role as a savior of his people.

Thanks to Miriam's ingenious ploy, Moses is nursed and raised by his own mother in his early childhood. But then he is brought to Pharaoh's palace to be raised as a member of the royal family. Moses must be both Hebrew slave and Egyptian prince. To lead his people, he must share their fate; to defeat the forces that enslave them, he must infiltrate the citadel of Egyptian royalty. He must "come into Pharaoh" (Exodus 10:1) and gain intimate knowledge of the essence of his power and vitality.

Defender of Israel

The first of Moses' actions to be explicitly recounted by the Torah delineate two central tasks of the leader: to defend his people from external threat, and to safeguard their internal integrity.

On the day that Moses attains adulthood, he "goes out to his brothers" and "sees their affliction" - his years in Pharaoh's palace have not inured him against affinity with this tribe of Hebrew slaves and sensitivity to their plight. He sees an Egyptian beating a Hebrew to death. He is compelled to act, sacrificing, with this single action, his privileged life as a member of the ruling class and binding his fate to that of his brethren.

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FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

The very next day Moses acts again, this time to intervene in a quarrel between two Jews. Seeing two of his brethren in conflict, he suddenly comprehends that the source of their enslavement is not the power of Egypt, but their own internal disunity, and that the key to their redemption lies in fostering a sense of mutual interdependency and responsibility among the members of the fledgling nation of Israel.

From these two demonstrations of leadership one would expect Moses to proceed directly to his ordained role as leader of Israel. But first he had to become a shepherd.

The Faithful Shepherd

For the role of a leader in Israel is not only to defend, redeem, preach and govern, but also and primarily, to nurture. Moses is the savior of Israel and their teacher and legislator, but also their *raaya meheimna* - their "faithful shepherd" and "shepherd of faith" - meaning that he is the provider of their needs, both materially and spiritually, feeding their bodies with manna and feeding their souls with faith.

So Moses is driven from Egypt to faraway Midian to become a shepherd of Jethro's sheep. The Midrash relates how another shepherd, David, learned the art of leadership by caring for his father's flocks: he would have the small kids graze first on the tender tips of grass before allowing the older sheep and goats to feed on the middle portion of the stalks, and only afterwards releasing the strong, young rams to devour the tough roots. A leader cannot simply point the way and a teacher cannot simply teach; he must "shepherd" his flock, supplying to each guidance and knowledge in a manner that can be absorbed and digested by its recipient.

The Midrash also tells how, one day, a kid ran away from the flock under Moses' care. Moses chased after it, until it came to a spring and began to drink. When Moses reached the kid he cried: "Oh, I did not know that you were thirsty!" He cradled the runaway kid in his arms and carried it to the flock. Said the Almighty: "You are merciful in tending sheep - you will tend My flock, the people of Israel."

The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that in addition to demonstrating Moses' compassion, the incident holds another important lesson: Moses realized that the kid did not run away from the flock out of mal-

ice or wickedness - it was merely thirsty. By the same token, when a Jew alienates himself from his people, G-d forbid, it is only because he is thirsty. His soul thirsts for meaning in life, but the waters of Torah have eluded him. So he wanders about in foreign domains, seeking to quench his thirst.

When Moses understood this, he was able to become a leader of Israel. Only a shepherd who hastens not to judge the runaway kid, who is sensitive to the causes of its desertion, can mercifully lift it into his arms and bring it back home.

The Ultimate Sacrifice

After many years of leadership in the making, the stage is set. He was a Hebrew baby cast into the Nile, an infant at Jocheved's breast, a young Egyptian prince, a fearless defender of his people, an equally fearless campaigner of Jewish unity, a shepherd in the wilderness. Then G-d revealed Himself to him in a burning bush to say: I have seen the affliction of My people, I have heard their cries, I know their sorrows. I'm sending you to redeem them. Go, take them out of Egypt, and bring them to Mount Sinai for their election as My chosen people.

Most amazingly, Moses refuses to go.

He doesn't just refuse - for seven days and seven nights he argues with G-d, presenting every conceivable excuse to decline his commission, until "G-d's anger burned against Moses."

First came the excuse of humility: "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?"

G-d ends all debate along those lines with the words: "I will be with you." Can even "the humblest man on the face of the earth" plead unworthiness after that?

But I don't know Your essence, says Moses. How can I present myself as a messenger when I can't explain the nature of the One who sent me?

So G-d tells him who He is.

They won't believe me when I say that G-d sent me.

G-d rebukes Moses for slandering His people. Yes, they *will* believe you. Whatever else you say about them (and there's lots to say), they are believers. But if you're not convinced of their faith, here's a few magic tricks you can perform.

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

Moses' excuses are running out. He tries: But I have a speech impairment. A leader needs to give speeches, you know.

G-d's answer is so obvious it hardly needs repeating.

So Moses finally just cries: O please, my G-d, don't send me. "Send by the hand of him whom You shall send."

Why, indeed, is Moses acting so strangely? His brothers and sisters are languishing under the taskmaster's whip; Pharaoh is bathing in the blood of Jewish children. The moment for which the Children of Israel have hope and prayed for four generations has finally come: G-d has appeared in a burning bush to say, "I am sending you to redeem My people." Why does Moses refuse? Out of humility? Because he's not a good speaker?

Our sages interpret the words, "Send by the hand of him whom You shall send," to mean: send by the hand of him whom You shall send in the end of days, Moshiach (the Messiah), the final redeemer of Israel.

The Chassidic masters explain that Moses knew that he would not merit to bring Israel into the Holy Land and thereby achieve the ultimate redemption of his people. He knew that Israel would again be exiled, would again suffer the physical and spiritual afflictions of *galut* (if Moses himself would have brought the Children of Israel into the Holy Land and built the Holy Temple, they would never have been exiled again and the Temple would never have been destroyed, since "all Moses' deeds are eternal"). So Moses refused to go. If the time for Israel's redemption has come, he pleaded with G-d, send the one through whom You will effect the complete and eternal redemption. For seven days and nights Moses contested G-d's script for history, prepared to incur G-d's wrath upon himself for the sake of Israel.

(This extreme form of self-sacrifice, in which a man like Moses jeopardizes his very relationship with G-d for the sake of his people, was to characterize Moses' leadership throughout his life. When the people of Israel sinned by worshipping the Golden Calf, Moses said to G-d: "Now, if You will forgive their sin—; and if You will not, blot me out of the Book which You have written.")

Nor did Moses ever accept the decree of *galut*. After assuming, by force of the divine command, the mission to take Israel out of Egypt, he embarked on a lifelong struggle to make this the final and ultimate redemption. To the very last day of his life, Moses pleaded with G-d to allow him to lead his people into the Holy Land; to his very last day he braved G-d's anger in his endeavor to eliminate all further *galut* from Jewish history. In Moses' own words: "I beseeched G-d... Please, let me cross over and see the good land across the Jordan, the good mountain (Jerusalem) and the *Levanon* (the Holy Temple). And G-d grew angry with me for your sakes... and He said to Me: Enough! Speak no more to Me of this matter..." (Deuteronomy 4:23-26).

Says the Lubavitcher Rebbe: G-d said "Enough!" but Moses was not silenced. For Moses' challenge of the divine plan did not end with his passing from physical life. The Zohar tells us that every Jewish soul has at its core a spark of Moses' soul. So every Jew who storms the gates of heaven clamoring for redemption continues Moses' struggle against the decree of *galut*.

WHY?

It's probably the oldest question in the history of human thought. It's surely the most disturbing, the most frequently asked and the least satisfactorily answered: Why, oh why, do bad things happen to good people?

Everyone asks the question: philosophers, theologians, butchers, bakers and candlestick-makers. No one really answers it. The Bible devotes the 41 chapters of the Book of Job to the subject, offering several interesting explanations only to refute them all, the conclusion being that finite man cannot fathom the ways of G-d.

For most, the protest against evil is something that rises out of one's own encounters with the rough spots of life. To a true leader who feels the pain of his people as his own, it is a bottomless cry issuing from the seemingly bottomless well of human suffering.

It didn't take long for Moses to issue that cry. Shortly after G-d appeared to him in a burning bush to appoint him liberator of Israel, Moses was back.

And Moses returned to G-d and said: "My G-d, why have You done evil to this people?! Why have You sent me?! For since I came to Pharaoh to speak

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FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

in Your name, he has done worse to this nation; and You have not saved Your people!" (Exodus 5:22-23).

And what does G-d say? Hold on just a little longer and you'll see that it all turns out right at the end. Encouraging words, especially when coming from G-d Himself; but still no answer for the ultimate Question.

Was it a failing on the part of Moses that he protested G-d's way of doing things? A cursory reading of the Talmudic and Midrashic expositions on Moses' dialogue with G-d would suggest that it was. Moses is criticized for not measuring up to the unquestioning faith of the Patriarchs; by some accounts, he is even punished for his outburst.

But a fundamental rule of Torah scholarship is that "the Torah does not speak negatively even of an impure animal" unless there is a positive, constructive lesson to be derived. To what end does the Torah tell us about Moses' "failing"?

Some would say that this is to teach us that even great men such as Moses can experience doubt and despair. The Lubavitcher Rebbe, however, takes a different approach. Moses' protest to G-d, says the Rebbe, was not a breach of faith, but an act of faith of the highest order.

Indeed, the question/protest/outcry, "Why have You done evil to Your people?!" can issue only from the mouth of a true believer. The non-believer, too, may be outraged by the cruelty and suffering our world abounds with, but just who is he outraged at? The blind workings of fate? The oblivious and apersonal god of physical law and evolutionary process? The random arrangement of quarks that make up the universe?

Even people who believe in G-d are not necessarily driven to confront Him as Moses did. They may not believe that He is truly responsible for all that transpires in the world. They may not be convinced of His ultimate goodness. They may think that it's pointless to protest to Him, since He doesn't really care how they feel about it. Or maybe everything's just fine in their lives, and what's happening to the rest of the world just doesn't concern them.

The true believer, on the other hand, knows that everything that happens happens only because it is ordained from Above. He knows that G-d is the essence of good and that only good flows from Him. And he also knows that man can talk to G-d and expect a response to his entreaties. So he cannot but cry out: "My G-d, why have You done evil to Your people?!"

This is what we must learn from Moses. We must speak to G-d, confront Him, ask Him: Why is there evil and suffering in Your world? We do not know enough to comprehend the answer; we must, however, believe and care enough to ask the question.

By Yanki Tauber; ytauber@chabadonline.com based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe.