PARSHAH IN A NUTSHELL

Vaeira

Exodus 6:2-9:35

G-d **reveals** Himself to Moses. Employing the "four expressions of redemption," He promises to **take out** the Children of Israel from Egypt, **deliver** them from their enslavement, **redeem** them and **acquire** them as His own chosen people at Mount Sinai; He will then bring them to the Land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness." Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron's **staff** turns into a **snake** and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of **plagues** upon the Egyptians.

The waters of the Nile turn to **blood**; swarms of **frogs** overrun the land; **lice** infest all men and beasts. Hordes of **wild animals** invade the cities, a **pestilence** kills the domestic animals, painful **boils** afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating **hail**. Still, "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and he would not let the children of Israel go; as G-d had said to Moses."

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Vaeira

Exodus 6:2-9:53

In wake of Moses' protest to G-d over the sufferings of Israel ("My G-d, why have you done evil to this people?!"), G-d assures the newly-appointed leader that the redemption is near. "I revealed Myself ("*vaeira*") to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob," and I shall fulfill My covenant with them. Evoking "four expressions of redemption," G-d promises:

I will bring you out from under the hardship of Egypt, and **I will save you** from their bondage; **I will redeem you** with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. **I will take you** to Myself as a nation, and I will be to you a G-d

Moses relays G-d's words to the Children of Israel, "but they hearkened not to Moses for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage."

Which prompts Moses who says to G-d: "Behold, the children of Israel have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh hear me?"

Moses' Family

The Torah breaks in its narrative of Moses' mission to Pharaoh to detail the family tree of the first leader of Israel:

Levi, the third son of Jacob, lived 137 years and had three sons: Gershon, Kehat and Merari. Kehat, who lived 133 years, had four sons, the eldest of whom was Amram. Amram married his aunt, Jocheved (the daughter of Levi); their marriage produced Miriam, Aaron and Moses.

Aaron married Elisheva, daughter of Aminadav and sister of Nachshon, from the tribe of Judah. They had four sons: Nadav, Avihu, Elazar and Itamar. Elazar married "one of the daughters of Putiel" and fathered Pinchas.

(Moses, as we learned in last week's reading, married Zipporah the daughter of Jethro and fathered two sons, the first of whom he named Gershom. The second is identified in Exodus 18:4 as Eliezer.)

Commentary

AND G-D SPOKE TO MOSES, AND SAID TO HIM: "I AM G-D. I REVEALED MYSELF TO ABRAHAM, TO ISAAC AND TO JACOB" (6:2-3)

G-d said to Moses: I regret the loss of those who have passed away and are no longer found. Many times I revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they did not question My ways, nor did they say to me, "What is Your name?" You, on the other hand, asked from the start, "What is Your name?" and now you are saying to Me, "You have not saved Your people!"

(Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a.)

You questioned My ways; unlike Abraham, to whom I said, "Isaac shall be considered your seed" and then I said to him, "Raise him up to Me as an offering" — still, he did not question Me"

(Rashi)

I WILL BRING YOU OUT, I WILL SAVE YOU, I WILL REDEEM YOU, I WILL TAKE YOU (6:6-7)

The four expressions of redemption (represented at the Passover seder by the Four Cups of wine) relate to the four aspects of our liberation from Egypt:

1) "I will bring out" — our physical removal from the geographical boundaries of Egypt;

2) "I will save" — our delivery from Egyptian hegemony (Egypt was a superpower that enslaved and oppressed many nations and peoples outside its borders);

3) "I will redeem" — the elimination of any future possibility of enslavement by the "great judgments" inflicted upon the Egyptians;

4) "I will take you to Myself as a nation, and I will be to you a G-d" — our election as G-d's chosen people at Mount Sinai, the purpose of the Exodus.

(Nachmanides; Soforno)

AND MOSES SPOKE BEFORE G-D, SAYING: "BEHOLD, THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL HAVE NOT LISTENED TO ME; HOW THEN SHALL PHARAOH HEAR ME?" (6:12)

The previous verse, however, states the reason that the Children of Israel did not listen to Moses — "for anguish of spirit, and for cruel bondage." Why, then, did Moses deduce from this that Pharaoh would not obey him?

But Moses knew that the power of a leader derives from his people. If he had not succeeded in penetrating their hearts, he would not be able to achieve anything on their behalf.

(Sefat Emet)

AND AMRAM TOOK HIM JOCHEVED HIS FATHER'S SISTER TO WIFE (6:20)

Why did G-d agree that a great man such as Moses should be the product of a marriage which is destined to be forbidden? (After the giving of the Torah, marriage with one's aunt is regarded as incestuous). Because no man is appointed as an authority over the community unless there is something objectionable in his past, lest he lord over the community. (As was the case with King David, who was descendant from the legally questionable marriage of Boaz and Ruth).

(Chizkuni)

AND AARON TOOK HIM ELISHEVA DAUGHTER OF AMINADAV, SISTER OF NACHSHON, TO WIFE (6:23)

Since it is stated that she was the daughter of Aminadav, would it not be obvious that she is the sister of Nachshon? From here, then, it is to be inferred that one who takes a wife should inquire about the character of her brothers. It was

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We also learn that Korach (who later led a rebellion against Moses' leadership see Numbers 16) was Moses' first cousin, the son of his father's younger brother, Yitzhar.

"And Moses was eighty years old, and Aaron eighty-three years old, when they spoke to Pharaoh."

Sticks and Snakes

Time and again Moses is sent to Pharaoh to demand in G-d's name: "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me!" If Pharaoh demands a sign, saying, "Show a miracle for yourselves!" Aaron is instructed to, "Take your rod, and cast it before Pharaoh; and it shall turn into a snake."

Moses and Aaron went in to Pharaoh, and they did so as G-d had commanded: Aaron threw down his rod before Pharaoh, and before his servants, and it turned into a snake.

Pharaoh is unimpressed. He summons "the wise men, the sorcerers, and the magicians of Egypt,"

And they also did in like manner with their secret arts: they cast down every man his rod, and they turned to snakes.

And Aaron's rod swallowed up their rods.

Still, "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, that he did not hearken to them."

The Plagues Begin

Now G-d instructs Moses to confront Pharaoh on the bank of the Nile, where the king is to be found in the morning, and say to him:

The G-d of the Hebrews, has sent me to you, saying, "Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness"; and, behold, till now you would not hear.

In this you shall know that I am G-d: behold, I will smite with the rod that is in my hand upon the water in the River, and it shall he turned to blood.

Aaron strikes the River with the staff, and all the water in Egypt — in "their streams, their canals, their ponds, and all their pools of water in vessels of wood, and in vessels of stone" — turns to blood for seven days. Pharaoh's magicians duplicate the feat, and Pharaoh persists in his refusal to let the Children of Israel go.

So G-d sends another plague on Egypt. "If you refuse to let them

Commentary

taught: most children take after the brothers of the mother.

(Talmud, Bava Batra 110a)

AARON THREW DOWN HIS ROD BEFORE PHARAOH AND IT TURNED INTO A SNAKE. PHARAOH SUMMONED THE WISE MEN AND SORCERERS OF EGYPT... EACH CAST HIS ROD, AND THEY TURNED INTO SNAKES (7:10-12).

Then did Pharaoh begin to mock them and crow at them like a cock, saying to them: "So these be the signs of your G-d! It is usual for people to take goods to a place which has a shortage of them; but does one import murics into Apamea or fish into Acco? Are you not aware that all kinds of magic are within my province?" He then called for children to be brought from school and they also performed these wonders.

Said Moses: "To Herbtown one carries herbs."

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND AARON'S ROD SWALLOWED UP THEIR RODS (7:12)

G-d said: "If Aaron's serpent will swallow up the serpents of the Egyptians, there will be nothing remarkable in that, for serpents usually swallow each other. Therefore let it resume its original form and swallow up their serpents."

(Midrash Rabbah)

The Torah's "ways are ways of pleasantness, and all its paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17) — our task is to create light, not to battle darkness. Nevertheless, there are times when we are forced to resort to battle, when we must vanquish those who seek to vanquish us. Thus Moses, the gentle shepherd of Israel, and Aaron, the ultimate man of peace, find themselves in the role of "judge and chastiser of Pharaoh," crushing the might of Egypt and obliterating its icons and myths.

Therein lies the lesson to be derived from the fact that Aaron's rod swallowed the "serpents of the Egyptians" after it had reverted back to its original form, rather than as a serpent itself. For even when he wages war, the Jew is not a warrior. Even when he consumes the serpents of the enemy, he is not a serpent himself, spewing poison and hate. His instrument of vengeance is as devoid of vengeful feeling as a petrified rod, as cold to the rage of war as a lifeless stick.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

And G-d spoke to Moses, Say to Aaron, Take your rod, and stretch out your hand upon the waters of Egypt (7:19)

The first three plagues — blood, frogs and lice — were brought on by Aaron. For G-d said to Moses: the waters which protected you when you were cast into the River, and the soil which protected you when you buried the Egyptian — it is not fitting that they should be afflicted by your hand. Therefore, I shall afflict them through Aaron.

(Mishnat Rabbi Eliezer)

IN VESSELS OF WOOD, AND IN VESSELS OF STONE (7:19)

If an Egyptian and an Israelite were in one house where there was a barrel full of water, and the Egyptian went to fill a pitcher, he would discover that it contained blood; but the Israelite would drink water from the same barrel. If the

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go," is the warning conveyed by Moses,

The River shall bring forth frogs in swarms; and they will go up and come into your house, and into your bedchamber, and into your bed and into your *ovens*, and into your kneading troughs

This time, when the plague materializes Pharaoh changes his tune. "Entreat G-d, that He may take away the frogs from me and from my people," he says to Moses and Aaron, "and I will let the people go."

Tell me the exact moment you want the frogs to go, challenges Moses, and it will happen then. "Tomorrow," says Pharaoh.

"Be it according to your word," says Moses, "that you may know that there is none like G-d our G-d." And so it came to pass.

But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearkened not to them; as G-d had said.

Lice, Hordes and Pestilence

The plagues continue. For the third plague,

Aaron stretched out his hand with his rod and smote the dust of the earth; and it became lice in man and in beast throughout all the land of Egypt.

For the first time, Pharaoh's magicians are unable to duplicate the feat; "This is the finger of G-d," they concede. Still, "Pharaoh's heart was hardened, and he hearkened not to them; as G-d had said."

In the next plague, G-d sends hordes of wild beasts all over Egypt — only the land of Goshen is spared, as a sign that "I will put a division between My people and your people." Pharaoh pleads with Moses to have the beasts removed. This time he tries bargaining with the Hebrew leader: if you need to offer sacrifices to your G-d, do it here, in Egypt - why must you go out into the wilderness?

But the animals we shall sacrifice are worshipped by the Egyptians, says Moses. "If we should sacrifice the abomination of

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Egyptian said to him: "Draw me some water with your own hand," and the Israelite gave it to him, it became blood. Even if he said to him, "Let us both drink from one vessel," the Israelite would drink water but the Egyptian would drink blood. Only when he had bought the water from the Israelite for money was the Egyptian able to drink water, and in this way the Israelites became rich.

(Midrash Rabbah)

AND SEVEN DAYS WERE COMPLETED, AFTER G-D HAD SMITTEN THE RIVER (7:25)

With each of the plagues, Moses would warn them for 24 days, and the plague itself would last seven days.

(Midrash Rabbah)

BEHOLD, I WILL SMITE ALL YOUR BORDERS WITH FROGS (7:27)

The plagues which G-d brought upon the Egyptians also had the effect of establishing peace amongst them. How was this? There was a dispute between the Ethiopians and the Egyptians; the latter said: "Our borders extend till here," whilst the former claimed "Our borders extend to here." But when the frogs came the dispute was resolved, for the plague only visited the Egyptian borders and thus the Ethiopians knew which was not theirs.

(Midrash Rabbah)

[THE FROGS] WILL GO UP AND COME INTO YOUR HOUSE, AND INTO YOUR BEDCHAMBER, AND INTO YOUR BED AND INTO YOUR OVENS (7:28)

What led Chananiah, Mishael and Azariah to deliver themselves, for the sanctification of the Divine Name, to the fiery furnace? (see Daniel, ch. 3). They argued to themselves: If frogs, which are not commanded concerning the sanctification of the Divine Name, yet it is written of them, "And they shall come up and go into your ovens," We, who are commanded concerning the sanctification of the Name, how much the more so!

(Talmud, Pesachim 53b)

"Self-sacrifice" is not just the willingness to die for one's beliefs; it is the way in which one lives for them. It is the willingness to sacrifice one's "self" — one's desires, one's preconceptions, one's most basic inclinations. Indeed, the Hebrew term for self sacrifice, mesirut nefesh, means both "giving of life" and "giving of will."

Thus, the lesson of self-sacrifice is derived from a frog, a cold-blooded creature, who enters a burning oven. The ultimate test of faith goes beyond the issue of life and death — it is the ability to transcend one's very nature for the sake of a higher truth.

(The Lubavitcher Rebbe)

AND THE MAGICIANS BROUGHT UP FROGS ON THE LAND OF EGYPT (8:3).

Only "on the land of Egypt" — their frogs did not jump into the ovens.

(Be'er Mayim Chaim)

THE MAGICIANS DID SO WITH THEIR SECRET ARTS TO BRING FORTH LICE, BUT THEY COULD NOT (8:14)

Because a demon has no power over an object smaller than a barley grain.

(Rashi)

PHARAOH SAID: " SACRIFICE TO G-D YOUR G-D IN THE WILDERNESS, BUT DON'T GO TOO FAR; PRAY FOR ME (8:24)

The animal soul of man, which embodies his selfish and material desires, knows that it is futile to try to dissuade a Jew from serving his Creator. So when

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Egypt before their eyes, will they not stone us?" No, we must go off a distance of "three days' journey into the desert, and sacrifice to our G-d in the manner that He instructs us."

Ok, says Pharaoh, I'll let you go. Just don't go too far. Please, pray for me.

"I will pray to G-d to remove the hordes," says Moses. "But let not Pharaoh deal deceitfully any more in not letting the people go." But that, exactly, is what Pharaoh does.

In the fifth plague, the Egyptians' cattle — "the horses, asses, camels, oxen and sheep" — all die. Pharaoh sends to see if the cattle belonging to the Israelites have met a similar fate, and learns that not a single one of their animals was afflicted. Still he hardens his heart.

Boils and Hail

The sixth plague was the plague of boils. G-d instructs Moses and Aaron to "Take handfuls of soot of the furnace, and let Moses sprinkle it heavenwards in the sight of Pharaoh." They do so, and the soot "became a pox breaking out in blisters on man and beast."

"And G-d hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he hearkened not to them; as G-d had spoken to Moses."

When Moses warned that the seventh plague would be a devastating hail, those among the Egyptians who "feared the word of G-d" brought their servants and cattle indoors; those who did not, left them out in the field.

And Moses stretched out his rod towards heaven and G-d rained hail upon the land of Egypt.

So there was hail, and fire flaring up within the hail, very grievous, such as there was none like it in all the land of Egypt since it became a nation.

And the hail smote throughout all the land of Egypt all that was in the field, both man and beast; and the hail smote every plant of the field, and broke every tree of the field. Only in the land of Goshen, where the children of Israel were, was there no hail.

A repentant Pharaoh calls for Moses and Aaron, and proclaims:

"I have sinned this time; G-d is righteous, and I and my people are wicked. Entreat G-d that there be no more mighty thunderings and hail; and I will let you go".

Moses went out of the city from Pharaoh, and spread out his hands to G-d; and the thunders and hail ceased, and the rain was no longer poured upon the earth.

For the seventh time, the scenario repeated itself:

When Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders had ceased, he sinned yet again. And the heart of Pharaoh was hard, neither would he let the children of Israel go; as G-d had spoken by Moses.

a Jew wants to pray, it doesn't try to stop him; instead, it seeks to transform his service into just another selfish endeavor. Go ahead, says the "Pharaoh" within, serve your G-d. "But don't go off too far. Pray for me as well..."

(Chassidic Saying)

AND G-D HARDENED THE HEART OF PHARAOH, AND HE HEARKENED NOT TO THEM (9:12)

Following each of the first five plagues, it is written, "And Pharaoh hardened his heart"; regarding the sixth plague it says, "And G-d hardened the heart of Pharaoh." When G-d saw that Pharaoh did not relent after the first five plagues, He said: Even if Pharaoh now wished to repent, I shall harden his heart, in order to exact full punishment from him.

(Midrash Rabbah)

SO THERE WAS HAIL, AND FIRE FLARING UP WITHIN THE HAIL (9:24)

Imagine two fierce legions who were always at war with one another, but when the king needed their services for his own battle, he made peace between them, so that both should carry out the orders of the king. Likewise, fire and water are hostile to each other, but when the time came to do war with Egypt, G-d made peace between them and both smote the Egyptians as "fire within the hail."

(Midrash Rabbah)

MOSES WENT OUT OF THE CITY FROM PHARAOH, AND SPREAD OUT HIS HANDS TO G-D (9:29)

Moses did not wish to pray to G-d inside the city, for it was full of idols.

(Rashi)

AND THE FLAX AND THE BARLEY WERE DESTROYED; FOR THE BARLEY WAS IN THE EAR, AND THE FLAX WAS IN BUD. BUT THE WHEAT AND THE SPELT WERE NOT STRUCK, FOR THEY WERE STILL PLIANT (9:31-32).

A person should always be pliant as a reed; and let him never be unyielding as the cedar.

(Talmud, Taanit 20b)

AND THE THUNDERS AND HAIL CEASED, AND THE RAIN WAS NO LONGER POURED UPON THE EARTH (9:33)

The hailstones which were on the way down when Moses prayed were suspended in midair, and did not reach the earth. When did they descend? In the days of Joshua they descended upon the Amorites, as it is written (Joshua 10:11): "And it came to pass, as they fled from before Israel... that G-d cast down great stones from heaven upon them." The remainder will descend in the days of Gog and Magog.

(Midrash Rabbah)

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FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

What is G-d's Answer?

Last week's Parshah concluded with the epochal exchange between Moses and G-d over the mystery of human suffering. Moses protested, "My G-d, why have You done evil to this people?"; and G-d replied: "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."

This week's reading, the Parshah of *Vaeira* ("And I made Myself seen"), opens with a new communication from G-d to Moses, in which G-d says:

> *"I am G-d (Y-H-V-H). I made Myself seen to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob, by the name of El Sha-dai, but by My name, Y-H-V-H, I did not make Myself known to them."*

G-d then goes on to reiterate His promise to the Patriarchs to give the Land of Canaan to their descendents, evoking the "four expressions of redemption -- "I will bring you out, I will save you, I will redeem you, I will take you" -- which chronicle the various stages of the redemption, culminating in Israel's election as G-d's chosen people at Mount Sinai.

The commentaries see this divine communication as the continuation of the exchange between G-d and Moses at the end of the previous Parshah. G-d's mention of His relationship with the Patriarchs -- Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- is interpreted as a rebuke to Moses:

> G-d said to Moses: I regret the loss of those who have passed away and are no longer found. Many times I revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they did not question My ways, nor did they say to me, "What is Your name?" You, on the other hand, asked from the start, "What is Your name?" and now you are saying to Me, "You have not saved Your people!" (Talmud, Sanhedrin 111a).
>
> You questioned My ways; unlike Abraham, to whom I said, "Isaac shall be considered your seed" and then I said to him, "Raise him up to Me as an offering" -- and still, he did not question Me (Rashi)

G-d also says: "By My name, Y-H-V-H, I did not make Myself known to them." This is understood by the commentaries as G-d saying to Moses: "I did not reveal My quintessential truth," represented by the divine name Y-H-V-H, to the Patriarchs; they knew Me only by the name El Sha-dai which represents a more limited manifestation of My being. They accepted that they could never comprehend My infinite, unknowable essence. You, on the other hand, to whom I have revealed My truth, question My ways (Rashi; Nachmanides).

This is how the opening verses of Vaeira are interpreted by the Midrash, Talmud and the biblical commentaries. The Chassidic masters delve deeper into these verses, and find there more than a rebuke to Moses: in G-d's words they also see an answer (of sorts) to Moses' question, and also a justification of his outcry.

The Pendulum of Life

All life, say the Kabbalists, is characterized by a to-and-fro movement called ratzo v'shov (running forth and drawing back) or *mati v'lo mati* (reaching and retreating). The heart contracts and expands; the lungs exhale and inhale; the body sleeps, extinguishing its more elevated faculties (cohesive thought, sight, hearing, etc.), in order to rejuvenate its energies; the mind meditates, emptying itself of prior conceptions in order to receive fresh insight; the earth enters night and winter, enduring periods of darkness and hibernation in order to attain a new dawn or spring.

The same is also true of the flow of vitality from G-d to His creation: this flow also pulsates, running forth and drawing back, reaching and retreating. And the more elevated the bestowal is, the more intense is the withdrawal to precede it. Thus, times of extraordinary illumination from Above are always preceded by periods of profound spiritual darkness.

Thus Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi explains G-d's words to Moses regarding the difference in the quality of His relationship with the Patriarchs and His newly unveiled revelation of the divine name Y-H-V-H.

To the Patriarchs -- G-d is saying to Moses -- I revealed Myself only as *El Sha-dai*, relating to them only via the constraints and limitations that define My investment within the created reality. But to you and your generation I shall reveal, for the very first time, "My name Y-H-V-H," the

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name that connotes "My quintessential truth." For the purpose of the Exodus (as G-d said to Moses at the burning bush) is the revelation at Mount Sinai and the communication of My Torah, which is the very embodiment of My wisdom and will.

You ask why My people must suffer so terribly in their exile. You ask why is My face hidden, why I have seemingly withdrawn My providence over their lives. But this seeming withdrawal is an integral part of the tremendous revelation to come, which shall herald a new, unprecedented intimacy between man and G-d.

Indeed, adds the Lubavitcher Rebbe, the revelation of the Exodus and the concealment that preceded it are two faces of the same reality. In order for the people of Israel to relate to the quintessential truth of G-d revealed at Sinai, they first had to unearth their own quintessential truth -- which could manifest itself only in the nadir of their Egyptian *galut*.

"Truth" is that which is consistent and unchanging, the core reality of a thing that remains unaffected by all external circumstances. The quintessential truth of the Jewish soul is its loyalty and attachment to G-d; but loyalty and attachment to G-d under conditions of spiritual enlightenment and material prosperity cannot, in themselves, attest to this truth. There is no indication that the relationship would endure under less ideal conditions. But when the Jewish soul perseveres in its loyalty and attachment to G-d in the darkest hour of galut, it manifests the truth of its bond with G-d, demonstrating that this loyalty and attachment is, in fact, the unalterable core of its being.

"I am Y-H-V-H," said G-d to Moses. I am in the process of revealing My quintessential self to you. But the only part of you that can apprehend this revelation is your own quintessential self. And your own quintessential self rises to the surface of your souls only under the terrible conditions of *galut.*

Mind and Heart

The difference between Moses and the Patriarchs is also explained by the Chassidic masters as deriving from the different places they occupy within the total "body" of Israel. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are identified with the attributes of "love," "awe" and "harmony" (*chessed, gevurah* and *tiferet*), while Moses represents the attribute of "wisdom" (*chochmah*). Otherwise stated, the Patriarchs are the heart of the Jewish people, while Moses is the mind of Israel.

Often, a person who calmly accepts the painful realities of life is described as "taking it philosophically," while one who agonizes over his own or others' troubles is seen as "being emotional." Behind these categorizations is the notion that, in purely rational terms, the cause, or even need, for human suffering can be explained. On the other hand -- goes this line of thinking -- a person with a sensitive heart will not accept any rationalization of evil, however undeniable its logic.

The truth, says the Lubavitcher Rebbe, is the very opposite. Indeed, the difference between one who cannot reconcile himself to the existence of evil and suffering in G-d's world and the one who can accept it is the difference between mind and heart; but it is the mind-driven person who incessantly questions and challenges the way things are, whereas it is the one with "heart" who can find it in himself to accept the most terrible of incomprehensibilities.

It is true that logical explanations for evil and suffering have been presented by a succession of philosophers and theologians. For example, it is proposed that suffering refines the human being, teaching him compassion and sensitivity. It has also been explained that there is no greater satisfaction than the overcoming of adversity and no greater pleasure than the conquest of pain. The philosophical mind can also appreciate that a persons finest and most potent abilities are unleashed only under conditions of challenge and trial. Finally, there can be no denying the axiom that without a truly free choice between good and evil, nothing we do could possibly be of any significance.

These explanations are all valid, in their way; indeed, we have presented one such "explanation" in the first part of this article. But when they are approached from a purely rational standpoint, the mind of the believer will not be satisfied by any of them. Because after all is said and done, after each of these explanations is examined and the questions that can be asked on them are posed and resolved, there remains one final question: Why must it be this way?

All these explanations -- the mind will inevitably argue -- are predicated upon our understanding of human and universal nature. But You, G-d, are the creator of nature and logic; You could have made the nature of things to be other than what they are. You could have made significant what logic dictates is of no significance. You could have created a reality in which there *is* gain without pain, in which the

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best in man could be realized without the threat and challenge of evil, in which the highest peaks of life could be scaled without the momentum of its lowest descents.

This perfectly logical question has no logical answer. Thus, the mind of the believer will never accept the "necessity" for evil and pain.

The heart also perceives the pain -- indeed, it senses it more deeply than the aloofly objective mind. But while the mind categorizes reality into compatible and non-compatible suppositions, the heart tolerates contradiction. Can you "prove" to a mother that her child is undeserving of her love? It's not that she is blind to his deficiencies and transgressions -- it's simply that they are irrelevant to her love. Outrage and devotion, judgment and acceptance, pain and pleasure -- a heart that loves has room for them all, simultaneously, in its warm embrace.

This, says the Rebbe, is the deeper significance of G-d's evocation of the unquestioning faith of the Patriarchs in His words to Moses. Moses, G-d is saying, you are the mind of My people -- the mind that is the instrument for apprehending My truth and, with it, illuminating the world. You will even comprehend "higher" aspects of My truth than did the Patriarches. But as a "mind," you question My creation of evil and suffering, and can find no rationally satisfying answer. Yet you, too, are a child of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. You, too, have inherited from them the Jewish heart the intrinsic bond with your G-d that cannot be shaken by the most terrible of contradictions.

Seeing is Believing

Therein also lies the significance of the word *vaeira* -- "and I made Myself seen" -- with which G-d describes His relationship with the Patriarchs, and which give our Parshah its name in the Torah.

There are many ways that a person may come to believe in a certain truth. He may hear of it from a reliable source, it may be proven to him logically, or he may see it himself. Yet there is an essential difference between the perception of sight and all other senses. The other senses are refutable -- they merely prove something to the person; subsequent developments can undermine the initial conviction. But sight is absolute. The thing perceived may be denied by the entire world, it may be utterly illogical, but the person who has seen it knows it is true. He saw it.

Faith can exist on many levels -- faith comparable to the conviction in something that is heard, for example, or faith as powerful as a logical fact. But the most powerful faith is faith on the level of sight. Faith as sight is absolute; the most blatant rational contradictions cannot shake it. The Patriachs, the "heart of Israel", saw G-d. That is why their faith in Him was not shaken by even the most agonizing "contradictions"

This also explains a puzzling passage in Rashi's commentary on our Parshah's opening verse. On the words "I made Myself seen," Rashi comments: "To the fathers." But the verse itself says, "I had made Myself to be seen to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob...", and every schoolchild knows that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the three fathers of the Jewish nation. What is Rashi telling us?

The Jewish people are suffering, and G-d's promises seem to only make things worse. To Moses' anguished words, G-d replies "Abraham, Isaac and Jacob never lost faith, they saw Me." Yet Moses and his people are obviously not Abraham, Isaac and Jacob -- that's why they reacted the way they did. So what is G-d telling them?

So Rashi explains: G-d's response to Moses is that He "made Himself seen" to the fathers. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the progenitors of the Jewish people in every sense of the word. Just as a child inherits the physical and psychological characteristics of his parents, in the same way, each and every Jew inherits the qualities of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Their every trait, experience, and achievement are stamped in our spiritual genes.

Because our fathers' faith in G-d was as absolute and unequivocal as sight, the potential for such faith exists within each and every one of us. No matter what our more external senses perceive, we can delve into our own selves for the inherent ability to see G-d: to sense His commitment to us even in the "darkest" of times.

Based on the teachings of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, adapted by Yanki Tauber

PARSHAH SUMMARY & COMMENTARY

FROM THE CHASSIDIC MASTERS

Trust

Unless you inhabit one of those idealized marriages of never-faltering sweetness and light, you know that feeling that comes in the aftermath of an argument with a loved one.

Harsh words have been spoken, angry words, accusatory words. The words have stopped because there's nothing left to be said. Instead there is pain and incredulity, but also a peculiar serenity. You realize that there are things about your husband/wife that you will never understand, and that it is best that it is that way, for it cannot be otherwise.

There is not yet forgiveness or acceptance for what has been said and done -- nor, perhaps, will there ever be. But there is something else, something that you have never felt before, at least not quite this way: a sense of trust. Your mind may be too angry or too numb to know, but your blood knows, your bones know, that now matter how wrenching the pain, no matter how agonizing the incomprehension, there remains your faith in each other, in your togetherness, in your joined future.

This is the mood that pervades the aftermath of the Torah reading of Shemot (Exodus 1:1-6:1). In Shemot's closing verses, Moses, the quintessential Jewish leader, rails against the suffering of his people: "Why have You done bad to this people?" he cried out to G-d. "Why did You send me? From the time that I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he made thing worse for this people, and You did nothing to save them!" G-d's response is equally harsh, rebuking, even punishing Moses for his outcry.

In the wake of their confrontation come the opening words of the following reading, Vaeira. There is no explicit answer to Moses' cry, no attempt to quell his terrible words. Instead there is a reiteration of the foundations of the marriage between G-d and His people: the promises made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the guarantee of imminent redemption. Things have happened in this marriage that we cannot understand or accept, at least not with our rational minds; but the bond holds true.

To be a Jew today, at the present juncture of our history, is to experience something akin to what Moses experiences at the juncture of Shemot and Vaeira. Just when all our dreams are on the verge of fulfillment, everything seems to be falling apart. Clouds of black despair darken our heavens, and we cry in helpless rage: Why is this happening to us? Why are we doing this to ourselves?

It is in such times that the elemental essence of our bond with G-d is unearthed. A soothing peace wells up within our agitated souls: we realize that we trust Him.

Rain, a River, Fire and Ice

On the eve of their entry into the Holy Land, Moses described to the Children of Israel the nature of their new homeland in the following way:

For the land which you are entering to inherit is not like the land of Egypt from which you are coming... it is a land of hills and valleys, which drinks water of the rain of the heavens (Deuteronomy 11:10).

Our Sages explain that this distinguishes the Land of Israel from "the land from which you are coming" since "The land of Egypt does not drink rainwater; rather, the Nile rises and waters it" (Rashi, Genesis 47:10).

Rain represents the reciprocal relationship between heaven and earth. Chassidic teaching cites the Torah's description (Genesis 2:6) of the first rainfall: "A vapor rises from the earth" to the heavens, and the heavens return it as rain which "quenches the face of the land." This, explain the Chassidic masters, represents the spiritual truth that "an arousal from below evokes an arousal from above"--that G-d responds to the efforts of man, reciprocating our prayers, yearnings and deeds with nurture from Above.

But rain alone does not suffice to make the land flourish and give fruit. The soil must be plowed--broken up and softened--before it can receive the seed and absorb the rain. Spiritually, this means that it is not enough to send up "vapors" of lofty feelings and virtuous works; one must first "plow" his ego, crush the clods of coarseness and arrogance in his personality, to make his life receptive to the flow of divine nurture from Above.

In the "Land of Israel" one plows and is nourished by rain. But in "Egypt" things were different. Egypt was nourished

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not by descending rain but by the overflow of the Nile, which would periodically flood the land. Nor was it necessary to plow its soil: the floodwaters of the Nile would leave behind a layer of extremely fertile silt which required no breaking up prior to planting.

The spiritual Egyptian is one who does not recognize the Heavenly source of the blessings of life. He believes that all is generated from below--that everything he has and has achieved is of his own making. Nor does he see the need for any "plowing" of his personality--he is fine as he is, clods and all.

Perverted Rain

When rain does falls in Egypt, it falls as hail--hail that is ice without and fire within. Thus the Torah describes the seventh of the "ten plagues" to visit the Egyptians:

And G-d rained hail upon the land of Egypt. And there was hail, and fire burning within the hail... (Exodus 9:23-24)

We often speak of "warm" and "cold" personalities. A "warm" person is a passionate, loving, outgoing individual, always ready to extend a hand and a smile to a fellow. A "cold" person is reserved, self-centered, indifferent to the fate of others. But the cold individual is also aflame--fired with self-love, ablaze with egotistical passions. Indeed, it is his excess of inner heat that is the cause of his icy exterior.

When rain falls in Egypt, it falls as a hail of ice-enclosed fire. In this unplowed land, where the heavenly source of its water is unseen and unrecognized, the nurture that descends from Above is perverted as a source of increased love of self and greater alienation between man and his fellow.

It's Only Natural

Pundits love generalizations. Half the world is this, the other half is that, and that explains just about everything.

Here, then, is our own generalization: the world consists of pagans and transcendentalists. Pagans eat, drink and sleep; transcendentalists work for world peace. Pagans believe that the way things are is the way things should be; transcendentalists believe that we were placed on this earth to change the way things are. Pagans worship nature; transcendentalists worship G-d.

The Egyptians were pagans, the Hebrews were transcendentalists. The Hebrews were slaves to the Egyptians; then G-d intervened, humiliated the Egyptians, freed the Hebrews and set them loose upon the world. This, in 30 words (more or less), is the story of the birth of the Jewish people.

Thus we read of ten plagues visited upon the Egyptians. These are usually understood as punishments for their cruel treatment of the Jews. But a closer reading of the Torah's account reveals that they also served a more basic function: to discredit the gods of Egypt so that "you shall know that I am G-d."

The Nile -- Egypt's source of sustenance and most revered deity -- turns to blood; the soil turns to vermin, the skies rain a lethal deluge of fire and ice, the light of day turns to inky blackness. Nature is transformed from a nurturing mother into a capricious witch.

Taking the Jews out of Egypt would not have achieved anything if the Jews had taken Egypt along with them when they went. So first the Jews had to witness the destruction of Egypt's gods: they had to hear their masters renounce the natural order they had deified; they had to see the "goodness" of nature exposed for the sham that it is.

Only when the paganism of Egypt had been uprooted from their hearts, could the Children of Israel proceed to Mount Sinai to receive their mandate as "A light unto the nations." Only then could they teach the world that nature is not to be worshipped, but improved upon; that the way things are is to be supplanted with the way things ought to be

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