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## Pharaoh's Astrologers

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

In Exodus 1:22, Rashi states that the day Moses was born, Pharaoh's astrologers told him that the Jewish messiah had been born, but they weren't sure as to whether this messiah was born of the Jews or of the Egyptians.

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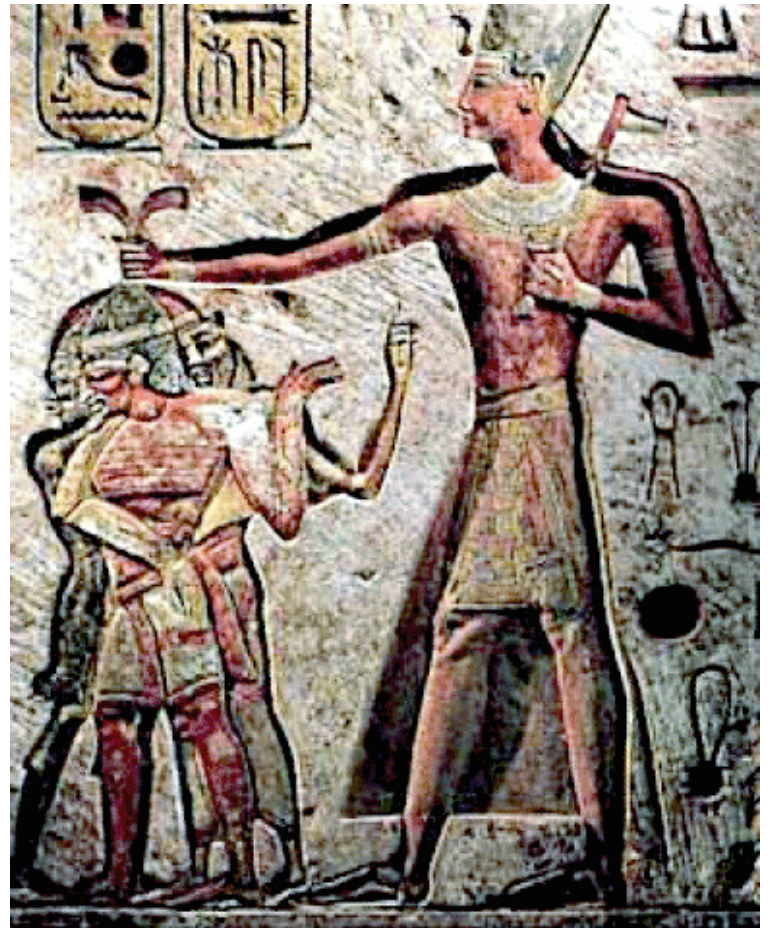
## WHY THE JEWS DESERVED BONDAGE

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM



Why were the Jews subjected to Egyptian bondage? To recap, Moses once saved the life of a Jew beaten by an Egyptian. Moses carefully investigated the scene, he saw no one present, and killed the Egyptian taskmaster and buried him in the sand. The next day, Moses sought to settle an argument between the infamous, rebellious duo Dathan and Aviram. They responded to Moses, "will you kill us as you killed the Egyptian?" Moses feared the matter was known. But how was this matter made public? The Torah described the scene just before Moses killed the taskmaster (Exod. 2:12), "And he turned this way and that way, and there was no man (present)..." So if there was clearly no one present, who informed on Moses? A Rabbi once taught there is only one possible answer; the Jew who Moses saved was there, he turned in Moses. We are astounded that one who's life was saved would inform on his savior. What causes such unappreciative behavior? The Torah's literal words describing Moses' astonishment are

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## Parashas Shemot

RABBI BERNARD FOX

“And a new king arose that did not know Yosef.” (Shemot 1:8)

This passage introduces the initiation of Bnai Yisrael's subjugation in Egypt. Our Sages disagree on the meaning of this passage. Rav understands the pasuk literally. The previous king died and a new king assumed authority. Shmuel disagrees. He argues that a new king did not

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# Parashas Shemot

RABBI BERNARD FOX

come to power. The existing king changed his policies. He is called a new king because of this reversal.[1]

Both of these interpretations are designed to explain the sudden change in the Egyptian king's attitude toward Bnai Yisrael. However these explanations share a problem. The pasuk describes a reversal. Bnai Yisrael were invited into Egypt. They were given autonomy and treated with respect. Suddenly, this changed. Paroh and his government began sponsoring the persecution of Bnai Yisrael. What caused this sudden change? The Chumash provides one hint. It comments that this new king did not know Yosef. Rav and Shmuel argue over whether this king was newly appointed or merely established new policies. But regardless of the interpretation, the implication of this hint is clear. Bnai Yisrael were treated well by the Egyptians in deference to Yosef. Once the Paroh and the Egyptians forgot Yosef, the persecution of the Jewish people began.

However, this hint does not provide a complete explanation of the change in treatment.. In order to appreciate the limitations of the pasuk's explanation, some introduction is required. The Egyptian people respected Yosef. Understandably, they were grateful to him. He had saved Egypt from a destructive famine. It follows that this gratitude extended to Yosef's family. The Egyptians' regard for Yosef had tremendous impact on their treatment of his family. Generally, immigrant populations can expect little tolerance. Persecution of alien minorities is common. As long as Yosef was alive, his family was spared this treatment. Furthermore, the Egyptians treated Bnai Yisrael with a respect that sometimes bordered on awe. This is most apparent at Yaakov's death. The Egyptians accompanied Yaakov's children to Canaan in order to honor Yaakov. The respect showed by the Egyptians was so grand that the people of Canaan were deeply impressed.[2] In short, the treatment Bnai Yisrael received was the opposite of the norm for immigrant groups.

This raises two questions. First, why were the Egyptians so devoted to Bnai Yisrael? True, Yosef had saved Egypt. Certainly, the Egyptians were obligated to treat his family fairly. But the respect of the Egyptians for Yosef's family went far beyond this requirement. What motivated the Egyptians? Second, as our pasuk explains, the Egyptians eventually forgot Yosef's contribution to their country. It is



understandable that this would lead to a cessation of the deferential treatment received by Bnai Yisrael. However, this is not what happened. The Egyptians initiated a policy of persecution. What caused this extreme change in the Egyptian attitude?

Nachmanides asks a related question in Parshat VaYigash. In that parasha, Yosef reveals himself to his brothers. He urges Yaakov to settle in Egypt with his family. In Egypt, he can protect them from ravages of the famine. The Torah comments that Paroh and his servants were pleased with this idea.[3] Why did Paroh and his government wish Yosef's family to settle in Egypt? Nachmanides responds that Yosef created somewhat of an embarrassment for the Egyptians. He was a freed prisoner and a former servant. These are not the usual credentials for a prime minister. The Egyptians were far from comfortable with this situation. Now, the Egyptians discovered that Yosef was a member of a prestigious family. His brothers were regarded, in their land, as princes. This

solved the Egyptians' problem. Yosef's brothers added to his credibility. He was worthy to serve as prime minister. He was a member of a distinguished family! The Egyptians were eager to receive Yosef's family. They were the proof of Yosef's worthiness to hold a high position.[4]

Nachmanides' insight has far-reaching implications. The honor the Egyptians bestowed on Yosef's family was not an expression of love or appreciation. The Egyptian's did not overcome the prejudices that are generally felt towards foreigners. However, these feelings were suppressed. The Egyptians needed to elevate Bnai Yisrael in order to preserve their own self-respect! This explains the Egyptians unusual deference towards Bnai Yisrael. It was not motivated by gratitude. It was an expression of self-interest.

This need only existed as long as Yosef lived. With Yosef's death, the Egyptians no longer needed to venerate his family. Now, all the suppressed prejudices emerged. Bnai Yisrael received the same treatment typically offered to the Jewish people in foreign lands. The persecution of Bnai Yisrael began!

**“And He said, ‘Do not come close to here. Remove your shoes from your feet. For the place upon which you stand is holy ground.’”** (Shemot 3:5)

Moshe has his first prophetic vision. He sees a bush that is completely aflame. But the bush is not consumed. Moshe begins to contemplate the meaning of this strange vision. A voice calls to him from the bush. The voice instructs him to remove his shoes before approaching closer. He is treading upon sanctified ground.

What is the meaning of this command? Many of the commentaries choose a similar approach to interpreting this element of the vision. Moshe is preparing to consider the meaning of the burning bush. The voice instructs Moshe that some form of preparation is needed before he can proceed. This preparation is related to the sacred meaning of the vision.

Gershonides explains that the Almighty was directing Moshe to seek the inner meaning of the vision. Shoes protect our feet from the ground. They also prevent us from feeling the texture and detail under our feet. If we wish to fully feel with our feet, we must remove our shoes. The voice told Moshe that if he hoped to

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# Parashas Shemot

RABBI BERNARD FOX

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understand the inner meaning of this vision, he must apply himself fully. He must open his mind and feel carefully for both the subtlety and depth of the message.[5]

Avranel offers a different explanation of this command. Moshe understood the vision as a representation of the suffering of Bnai Yisrael. This people had been thrown into the fire of persecution. Yet, they were not consumed. The survival of this tormented nation was a mystery to Moshe. He recognized that somehow the answer was contained in the vision. He began to contemplate the meaning of the vision more deeply. The voice instructed Moshe that he stood upon holy ground. The explanation of Bnai Yisrael's survival could not be found in natural causes. The continued existence of Bnai Yisrael was an expression of G-d's providence. Moshe must enter upon holy ground. He must contemplate the ways of the Almighty and His providence to find the answer. This requires that Moshe remove his material shoes. He must abandon the search for material explanations.

**“And Moshe answered, ‘They will not believe me and they will not obey my voice. For they will say, ‘Hashem has not appeared to you.’” (Shemot 4:1)**

Hashem directs Moshe to address Bnai Yisrael. He is to reveal to them his mission. He is to tell them that Hashem will redeem them from Egypt. Through Moshe, the Almighty will take Bnai Yisrael out of Egypt and lead them to the land of Israel.

Moshe protests. The people will not follow him. They will not believe that Hashem has spoken to him. Certainly, they will not follow him through the wilderness to the land of Israel.

Moshe's objections are difficult to understand. Moshe was not the first prophet. Hashem had spoken to the forefathers and others. None of these prophets raised Moshe's objections. They did not contend that their prophecies would be denied or that they would be dismissed as madmen. Why did Moshe bring up these issues?

Maimonides deals with this question in his Moreh Nevuchim. He offers an amazing answer. Maimonides begins by explaining that

Moshe's objections were completely appropriate. He was to represent himself as the Almighty's emissary. The nation should require Moshe to provide credentials. They would be fools if they followed Moshe without proof of his authenticity. Moshe recognized the legitimacy of Bnai Yisrael's suspicions.

Therefore, he asked Hashem to provide him with the means to verify his authenticity.

Based on this analysis, Maimonides reformulates our question. We cannot criticize Moshe's concerns. However, we must ask a different question. Why did previous prophets not raise these issues? Why did Avraham not ask Hashem for some means to confirm his authenticity? Why was Moshe the first prophet to raise this issue?

Maimonides explains that Moshe was different from previous prophets. Previous prophets received prophecies aimed at guiding them towards their own personal perfection. Alternatively, their prophecies provided knowledge of their destiny or the future of their progeny. The people did not require these prophets to prove their authenticity. They did not speak to the people in the name of Hashem.

Maimonides further explains that Avraham did not speak to humanity as the Almighty's spokesman. He addressed humankind as a teacher. He provided instruction based upon reason and argument. He presented rational proofs for his theology and philosophy. Avraham did not need to prove his prophetic status to the people. He never insisted that he be followed and obeyed as Hashem's spokesman.

Moshe was the first prophet instructed to address a nation on behalf of the Almighty. Moshe was to reveal Hashem's will and act as His spokesman. Moshe needed proof. He was confronted with a different and new mission. He was to represent the Almighty. He needed to prove his authenticity.[6]

[1] Mesechet Eruvin 53a.

[2] Sefer Beresheit 50:11.

[3] Sefer Beresheit 45:16.

[4] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Nachman (Ramban / Nachmanides), Commentary on Sefer Beresheit 45:16.

[5] Rabbaynu Levi ben Gershon (Ralbag / Gershonides), Commentary on Sefer Shemot, (Mosad HaRav Kook, 1994), p 9.

[6] Rabbaynu Moshe ben Maimon (Rambam / Maimonides) Moreh Nevuchim, volume 1, chapter 63. □

## HEBREW MIDWIVES

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

G-d's will is that man be formed as an infant, so that he experiences the phenomena of 'looking up to parents'. This relationship where parents are authoritative is needed if man is to eventually relate to G-d as an authority. Without this gradual process of growth wherein children develop authority roles in their mind, their relationship with G-d will be severely lacking.

It is G-d's will that man develop in this fashion, and that the mother is present at the side of the infants to nurture them. Yocheved and Miriam had a tradition of how to raise children. A Rabbi once explained why the Torah changes the names of Yocheved to "Shifra" and Miriam to "Pu-hah". Pharaoh had commanded these woman - the leaders of the women in Egypt - to kill the males, to which they would not comply, but saved all the children. These names refer to their physical and psychological care for those children: Yocheved would take care of the children physically, indicated by the use of the term "Shifra", and Miriam would console the children psychologically by singing to them, indicated by the term "Pu-hah". Attending to both the physical and psychological needs of a newborn, was something which was not only performed with knowledge, but was also an institution from the Forefathers. As men of great wisdom, the Forefathers understood all areas of man's needs, and this starts of course at birth. The Forefathers instituted that all Jewish mothers would cradle and pacify an infant throughout childhood so as to render each and every Jew most fit for a life of Torah. Torah enters one who is most perfected physically and psychologically. We see from this area of Chumash that the role of the woman is vital to all mankind. Since Love of G-d is the goal, man must first be rendered into one who is most receptive to ideas, and this is only if man is raised physically and psychologically sound. □

## WHY THE JEWS DESERVED BONDAGE

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

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"(Moses said) therefore the matter is known", referring to the disclosure of Moses' murder of the Egyptian. Rashi quotes a medrash on the words "the matter was known", paraphrasing Moses' own thoughts, (Rashi on Exod. 2:14) "The matter has been made known to me on which I used to ponder; What is the sin of the Jews from all the seventy nations that they should be subjugated to back-breaking labor? But now I see they are fit for this." Moses now understood why the Jews were deserving of Egyptian bondage. This ungrateful Jew's backstabbing act answered Moses' question. But this ungrateful nature is not its own trait, but a result of another trait: the act of informing on Moses displays an inability to undermine Egyptian authority; "Even if my brother Jew saves me, Egypt is still the authority who I must respect". It wasn't aggression against Moses, but an unconditional allegiance to Egypt. Even prior to Egyptian enslavement, the Jews' were emotionally crippled, and we predisposed to the phenomenon of identification with their oppressor. The famous Patty Hearst case teaches us of the Stockholm Syndrome, where victims sympathize with their captors. Israel too sympathized with Egypt. Such an identification would cause one to inform on his own friend, even on his own savior Moses. Moses witnessed this corrupt character trait firsthand and realized that Israel justly received the Egyptian bondage as a response. But how does the punishment fit the crime? (You may ask that this is reverse reasoning, as this ungrateful nature came subsequent to bondage, not before. But I answer that Moses too knew this, yet Moses saw something in this ungrateful act which he knew predated

Egyptian bondage, answering Moses' question why Israel deserved this punishment.) So what was Moses' understanding of the justice behind Israel's bondage? Seeing that the Jew informed on him even after saving his life, Moses said, "the matter is known", meaning, I understand why the Jews deserve bondage.

The informant was a valid example of the Jewish nation as a whole. He displayed how far the Jews were corrupted into recognizing man, over G-d. He represented to Moses, the sin of the entire people; somehow, in the Jew's mind, man was raised to inappropriate heights, overshadowing G-d's true position. man was so valued, that he would turn on his own brother, his own savior. What was the remedy? The Jews were presented by G-d (through slavery) the opportunity of realizing this sin. Slavery is the one institution where man desires not to be under the grips of man. We read, (Exod. 2:23) "...and their cries ascended to G-d because of the slavery. And G-d heard their cries..." The Egyptian bondage successfully caused the Jews to redirect their hearts towards G-d to remove their affliction. G-d's plan worked, and immediately commenced His plan to save them. Realizing the informant's sin, Moses now had his answer for why the slavery was a just response from G-d. The punishment fit the crime.

We look at Israel today and realize that the Jew saved by Moses has begot many offspring. How many Jews are sympathetic to other nations, to even those oppressing us through murder? How many Jews in Israel's government seek to "talk" to those who butcher infants? How many secular Jews corrupt G-d's justice by treating an enemy like a prospect for peace? King David acted properly. He did not go to the table to talk with his enemies. He rightfully warred against those who might slay his people. If our misguided leaders continue their deadly dance, Israel's people will continue to be murdered.

Moses taught us that the one who beats a Jew deserves death. How much more so those who plan the bus executions of civilians and children, with the most horrifying and painful methods? ▣

# DESPAIR

## The Product of Ignorance

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Last week we spoke of faith and bitachon in G-d. It is fitting that we now address the opposite pole of this attitudinal spectrum: despair. Why does one become desperate, and is desperation condoned by the Torah's philosophy? The answer to the former will also answer the latter.

We witness many individuals who appear desperate in many areas of life. Perhaps they cannot find work or a spouse. They continuously "fail" to secure the object of their desires. Of course, their failure most times is due to their own workings. They may seek the impossible, or be trapped by any one of a number of emotions, such as insecurity, which prospective employers and mates detect, and repel. But this unfortunate one keeps failing, and does not reflect on his actions to undo his misery, but blames the world, G-d, or other 'causes'.

Let's make one thing perfectly clear. G-d did not make man so he should be unhappy. Our very design teaches this, as does history's lessons of G-d's providence over His faithful servants. G-d is aware of every soul He created. He desires that each of us reach our potential, and experience the utmost happiness. If someone strives for the good life in accordance with Torah values, he can be certain he will be assisted by G-d. Maimonides teaches at the end of his Laws of Shmita and Yovale. (13:12) The tribe of Levi was set apart from the other tribes to serve G-d. They did not inherit land, go to war, or acquire anything through the work of their hands. Their position was to study Torah and teach the rest of the world. G-d was their inheritance. G-d provided for them. But Maimonides continues in the next law:

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# DESPAIR

## The Product of Ignorance

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

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*"And not the tribe of Levi alone, but every single man from anyone who enters the world (Jew or Gentile) that his spirit freely moves him, and he understands from his own wisdom to separate himself, to stand before G-d, to minister to Him, to serve Him, to know G-d,...and he leads an upright life as G-d created him (to do), and he removes from his neck the yoke of the public's calculations (the 'normal' life of the monetary) that men seek out,...this man is sanctified, as Kodesh Kadashim (most separated) and it will be that G-d is his portion forever (on Earth) and eternally (in the next world) and he will merit (from G-d) in this world a (monetary) portion that will sustain him, as do the priests and the Levites. Behold, as King David said, peace be upon him, "G-d, You are my portion and my cup, You support my lot."*

Maimonides teaches that to a person who devotes his entire life to studying and teaching G-d's wisdom, G-d responds by supporting this person with all of his needs. This means that G-d both desires and endorses through His providence, the one who lives in accord with the Torah. This does not include only living the Torah's life of study, but also, all that forms part of such a life. G-d will certainly assist this person in finding a spouse, (as seen with Rebecca) a livelihood, (as seen with Jacob, Joseph, Moses and others) and all else necessary that sustains a life of Torah. This person will be seeking his needs based on Torah parameters, and therefore will be blessed with them, as this is G-d's plan for each and every man who "enters the world", Jew or Gentile. These are Maimonides' words, and deserve much consideration.

G-d desires for man - above all else - that he partake of His wisdom. When one devotes

himself in such a fashion, where he forgoes a life of "keeping up with the Joneses", where he forgoes the materialistic culture around him, where he "separates" himself from others who chase and hoard temporal wealth, and instead, he wishes not to be distracted by such typical, blindly accepted strife and calculations which clutter life, when a person dedicates himself to Torah wisdom,...then G-d certainly provides. Why does Maimonides state that this one "separates" himself from others? What is the significance of this word? Why is it necessary that he separate, in order that G-d provide for him? I feel the reason is that man can live only one of two possible lifestyles: 1) he follows mankind and seeks the approval of others, or 2) he lives independently, following G-d's lifestyle, thinking only for himself, and this leads him to "separate" from his society. This does not mean he physically moves from his town. Rather, he does not follow the ways of his neighbors, but acts in accord with his intelligence. He does not chase after the material lifestyle as do most of his peers, nor societal approval, but he seeks a quiet life, where study, and teaching his family forms the majority of his day.

This person also lives a simple life monetarily, that his needs are quite small in comparison to those seeking wealth. With such reduced expenses, he has even more time to devote to study. He experiences far less times of want. His needs are little, so they are met easily as compared to others, whose fantasies propel them into debt after debt. Such a person is never desperate, as G-d provides for him.

Was King David ever desperate? Surely his life was replete with troubles. But he was never desperate. This is because his security in G-d's word as absolute truth, entertained no possibility that he, a G-d fearing man, would be abandoned

by G-d. King David must be an example for us, that even in the worst of situations, G-d is aware, and has every capability to remove our distress instantly. If we remain in pain, this is also G-d's method of pointing us towards that which requires our reflection. Sickness, poverty, tragic events, or even discomfort may be a message from G-d that we need correction. As Talmud Brachos states, we must examine our ways when we experience something negative. The Prophet Jeremiah states in Eicha 3:40, "Let us search our ways and examine, and return to G-d." Notice Jeremiah says "Let us search...". Why "search"? Why not simply "examine" without searching? This is because our true natures are quite hidden from how we view ourselves. An objective search is mandatory for our acknowledgement and understanding of our emotions. Only with this approach of searching, examining, and then returning to G-d, will we be successful. We should also note that although the devastation in Jerusalem was horrific, Jeremiah's mornings did not eventuate in despair, but in hope. The conviction in G-d's truth and Torah as the best life was not diluted by this tragedy. The converse is true, that the tragedy was due to an abandonment of Torah, thereby substantiating the truths of G-d's Torah-based curses.

G-d wishes we use the mind He gave us, so His indications of our flaws must be arrived at by our self analysis. How many of our matriarchs were barren? Initially they perceived this as a negative. But upon reflection, which was G-d's plan all along, they conformed their desire for children to G-d's goals, to the point where G-d gave them children. Channa prayed to G-d for children, and when she finally dedicated a child she would bear to G-d's service in the Temple, she became pregnant.

*(Maimonides' Guide for the perplexed, BOOK III - CHAPTER XVIII) ".....Hence it follows, in accordance with what I have mentioned in the preceding chapter, that the greater the share is which a person has obtained of this Divine influence, on account of both his physical predisposition and his training, the greater must also be the effect of Divine Providence upon him, for the action of Divine Providence is proportional to the endowment of intellect, as has been mentioned above. The relation of Divine Providence is therefore not the same to all men; the greater the human perfection a person has attained, the greater the benefit he derives from Divine Providence. This benefit is very great in the case of prophets, and varies according to the degree of their prophetic faculty: as it varies in the case of pious and good men according to their piety and uprightness. For it is the intensity of the*

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then apply this wisdom to free ourselves and start enjoying a life as an independent, healthy, and fully capable human being. Proverbs, 6:6-8:

*"Go to the ant lazy one; look at its ways and become wise. That (it) has no chief, overseer or ruler. She provides her bread in the summer, and gathers her food in the harvest."*

King Solomon wishes to teach that all the more so, it cannot be more difficult for us. He wishes the lazy one to end his laziness, and live. Additionally, if we live in accord with G-d's will, i.e., a life where Torah study is the majority of our day, as is teaching our children and fulfilling His commands, then G-d will most certainly assist us.

King David was not desperate, because he was not ignorant of G-d's will or of His capabilities. His life was scarred with more tragedies than ten people encounter today. Yet, his convictions kept him secure in the truth. His son and student King Solomon remained steadfast to the Torah's truths, and he too imbues us with remedies for our flawed thinking.

Until now we have addressed negative events. However, this must not be our main focus in life. Yes, even the righteous experience troubles, but to them, it is not magnified in their eyes. Life's troubles are dealt with, they do so wisely, they do not harp on inconveniences and bad tidings, so they may resume attending what truly captures their interest. What was their perspective which also contributes to true happiness? "Suss anochi al imrasecha, k'motsay shalal rav", "I am elated on Your words (Torah) like one who has found a great treasure." (Psalms 119:162) The real good and happiness is expressed here. Although we seek happiness according to our own agendas, this statement reflects what man finds as his true happiness, i.e., enlightenment through seeing marvelous insights into G-d's wisdom. King David actually refers to Torah as his "plaything". An endearing term, mirroring that youthful excitement we all experienced upon opening our new toy.

In summary, despair is not an attitude found in a G-d fearing and Torah abiding personality. Despair is the product of ignorance. The Torah personality possesses convictions that teach him that G-d is above any trouble thrown his way, and he trusts in G-d fully. He does not despair, as G-d's good life is absolutely true, so he is happy with his life, and deals with troubles intelligently, courageously, and confident that his Torah knowledge will guide him to a plan of his own design. Most assuredly, this Torah personality finds complete peace and fulfillment in the knowledge that G-d's providence exists, and that nothing can prevent his study of G-d's works.

*"God is my shepherd, I shall not want."* (Psalms 23:1) ■

# DESPAIR

## The Product of Ignorance

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

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*Divine intellectual influence that has inspired the prophets, guided the good in their actions, and perfected the wisdom of the pious. In the same proportion as ignorant and disobedient persons are deficient in that Divine influence, their condition is inferior, and their rank equal to that of irrational beings: and they are "like unto the beasts" (Ps. xlix. 21). For this reason it was not only considered a light thing to slay them, but it was even directly commanded for the benefit of mankind. This belief that God provides for every individual human being in accordance with his merits is one of the fundamental principles on which the Law is founded."*

Maimonides is quite clear - G-d's intervention is directly proportionate to our perfection. Perfection requires reflection, admission of guilt, resignation of wrong, and adherence to what is true and good, to Torah. All men sin, "For man is not righteous in the land, who does good and does not sin." (Ecclesiastes, 7:20) Therefore we all require correction of our morals and our ideas. We must welcome opportunities to correct ourselves, and not act out defensively, merely to keep our egos intact. Choose a broken ego and spiritual perfection, over an untarnished reputation while masking a corrupt soul.

I will offer an example of how people forfeit self awareness and improvement. People refer to hard times as a "losing streak." Do we recognize such a phenomenon as real? Maimonides states in his Guide, categories do not exist, except in the mind. The concept of a "losing streak" is not real. It is a projection onto reality, when one experiences many events not unfolding according to his desires:

*(Maimonides' Guide for the perplexed, BOOK III - CHAPTER XVIII) "It is an established fact that species have no*

*existence except in our own minds. Species and other classes are merely ideas formed in our minds, whilst everything in real existence is an individual object, or an aggregate of individual objects."*

Many times people fabricate a "losing streak" line of defense, attributing unwanted realities to some imagined or parroted "streak" of bad luck, as if something actually exists which overrides reality, victimizing him as an innocent target. One must realize this is in fact not an external occurrence, but the inner workings of human psychology. His sufferings may be stemming from a need to be parented, a fear of rejection, a lack of confidence, no resourcefulness, the list goes on. But most times, this list is of internal, crippling emotions. One who experiences consistent losses in sequence may be doing so as an expression of his sustained, infantile stages, 'crying out for his parent' by rendering himself "helpless", requiring assistance from another, when he is in fact fully capable. If someone else can help him, he can help himself. His abilities are no weaker. "Streaks" do not exist in reality, whether one is winning or losing. In fact, what one perceives as a "negative" experience, may in fact be a positive, if his wishes are not in line with reality:

We must redirect our pointing finger 180° when casting blame for our hard times. Creating phantom scapegoats will not correct our internal, emotional crutches that cripple us. Along with crippling emotions, G-d also equipped us with a very powerful tool: intelligence. Our minds can plan strategies that will emancipate us from a troubled state. We must have a two pronged approach: 1) become aware of our crippling emotions so as to deal with them head on, not giving in to them, and 2) we must use our minds to first seek council from anyone who has it, and

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# Pharaoh's Astrologers

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Later in Exod. 2:3, Rashi states that the reason why Moses' mother Yocheved couldn't hide him anymore, was because the Egyptians counted the months from when Yocheved and her husband remarried, to determine when a new baby would be born, in order to slay him. Since Moses was born three months premature, his mother was able to hide him that length of time. But at the ninth month, she knew that the Egyptians would be visiting to kill Moses.

A number of questions surface:

1) Did or didn't the Egyptians know when Moses was born? From the first Rashi, they seemed to know based on astrology, but from the second Rashi, we learn they miscalculated by three months, as they did not include Moses' premature birth in their calculations. If they felt Moses' true birthday was the day the messiah was born, they should have searched Yocheved's home three months earlier than they actually did, on Moses' actual day of birth. Additionally, they should have ceased killing males from that day forward, satisfied in their knowledge that they killed the messiah on that day. The fact that they continued to kill males even after their calculated day of the messiah's birth demonstrated their own doubt in their prediction. 2) How can humans know something outside of their sense perception? Is astrology fact or fiction?

3) Why were these astrologers only "certain" about one aspect (that he was born) but they were ignorant of his nationality?

On the one hand, one could side with the Egyptians and state that when they predicted Moses' birth, it was indeed his birthday. But since he was born three months premature, they didn't bother searching his mother's tent, as they assumed whoever was born, was born at nine months. This still shows ignorance. On the other hand it seems more correct to state that the Egyptians really didn't know anything, and when they stated that the messiah was born, it was a guess, perhaps to maintain their position. Previously, they suggested that Pharaoh's dreams of the 7 cows represented 7 daughters who would be born and then die. They were wrong here, and in many other cases. But it wasn't objectively proven that their theory was impossible, so they remained at their posts.

A Rabbi suggested that this may not have been the first time the Egyptian astrologers predicted the birth of a messiah. The astrologers, as in the past,



had to produce information to make themselves credulous, and to keep their positions. If they never inform Pharaoh of news, Pharaoh might dismiss, or even kill them. Thus, they were always under pressure to provide information to Pharaoh. They also had to be sure that any information couldn't be proved 100% wrong, so when they would state matters, they would do so either in generalities, or in areas that one can never prove impossible. Alternatively, the astrologers saw that Pharaoh was

now subjugating the Jews, as the Jews were more numerous, and possibly could pose a threat to the Egyptians. The astrologers surmised the possibility of an uprising, and weren't sure whether it would be spearheaded by a Jew or an Egyptian sympathizer. They therefore used rational deduction in their forecast to Pharaoh and told him that it could be either a Jew or Egyptian savior.

The fact that the astrologers couldn't determine Moses' nationality, and that the second Rashi

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# Pharaoh's Astrologers

**RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM**

implies miscalculation, uncovers their ignorance, and removes any credibility of their astrology.

Perhaps this is why Rashi recorded these two stories, to teach that their astrology is a farce. Just as people today cannot read palms, or foretell events, so too was the case in Egypt. Pharaoh had his astrologers as a source of security for areas where he was in doubt. All that was needed was that Pharaoh believed them. Objective reality was not a concern of Pharaoh. Emotional security was.

The Radak, as well as the Rabbis, dismiss any truth to the Baales Ov (the female conjurer) in Samuel I, 28:7-19. They deny any reality to this story, and call it all "futility, void, lies, and mockery".

King Saul had visited the Baales Ov to bring up Samuel from the dead. The story on the surface says she did, and that King Saul talked with Samuel. The Radak however quotes the Rabbis and states, "the Rabbis said three things in regards to conjurers, 1) the one who brings up the dead sees but doesn't hear the dead person, 2) the one who is in need hears, but sees not the dead, and 3) the ones who do not care either way, neither see nor hear anything. Such was the case with King Saul, he was in need, so he heard Samuel talking, the Baales Ov saw, but didn't hear, and the two who Saul traveled with, Avner and Amasa, neither saw nor heard a thing."

What does this prove? That King Saul's discussion with Samuel was a daydream, a fantasy, or an illusion. Just as sometimes we think we hear someone talking to us or calling our name, all but to turn and see nobody there, so also according to Radak and all the Rabbis was this case with King Saul and the Baales Ov. He was in such need, that he thought he heard Samuel. His two men didn't care, so they heard nothing. And the Baales Ov needed to keep her status, so she feigned seeing him.

As Jews, a rational people, we do not believe knowledge emanates from sorcerers. They are all false. Knowledge emanates from G-d, and there are specific ways of uncovering this knowledge - careful analysis, and rational thinking. Just as the study of physics and all other sciences which are based on principles embedded in the tangible universe require methodology to arrive at concepts, so much more so, the abstract world of ideas disclosed to us through the Torah requires a refined, trained, and rational approach.

It is relatively easy to detect when something is an accurate science. If it follows rational principles, it can be a science. If however, we hear statements such as, "this crease in your palm is long, therefore you will live long", we should see no connection between an accidental fold in our flesh, and the avoidance of disastrous situations which will lead to our death. This type of statement should be immediately identified as outside the rational sphere.

Taking what we hear on the surface as truth, and believing it, is not the way to learn. Even when reading a Rashi, we should look into it, and see if it is as clear as rational ideas should be. If not, perhaps he is teaching us something beyond the surface.

*A reader responded to this article as follows:*

**Reader:** You seem to say that Pharaoh's astrologers were incorrect, in essence guessing, and that Saul did not really hear Samuel. If so, first of all, why were these episodes recorded in Tanach?

**Mesora:** See the Radak on the incident concerning Saul and the Baales Ov, the female conjurer. The Radak states that Samuel did not rise from the ground as a cursory reading would suggest. Radak states that it was all a projection on Saul's part - a fantasy of his mind. The Torah is designed to teach man about the law, which is aimed to benefit man's soul, his mind, and his drives. As such, the reason the Torah records such stories is to teach us how man operates psychologically, whether it be when man operates positively, or even negatively, as with Saul, and Pharaoh's astrologers. Seeing how Saul and Pharaoh's astrologers made mistakes, teaches the reader about incorrect notions, so we learn more about our nature as humans, and that we may also identify that from which we should distance ourselves.

**Reader:** Also, if the astrologers were guessing, why would Pharaoh be willing to kill the thousands of Egyptian boys who would have been born that day?

**Mesora:** The astrologers were in positions of counsel due to Pharaoh's need for advice. They counseled Pharaoh with general statements, such as those where they could not be proved wrong, i.e., "you will have 7 daughters, and you will bury

7 daughters". If Pharaoh approached them and said, "where are my 7 daughters?", they could respond. "you will have them yet". Similarly, they stated that "a savior of the Jews is to be born". Pharaoh was superstitious, and out of a fear of an uprising of a savior, he, like any other power hungry leader, might resort to following the only prospect for success, that being the astrologers' advice of slaying even Egyptian males.

**Reader:** And if they were guessing, how did they get the date right? M

**Mesora:** Who said this was the only day they told Pharaoh that a savior could be born? Perhaps they said this on many occasions, and chance had it that they also said it on Moses' birthday. Keep in mind that the astrologers previously stated that a savior is to be born. The first time they said this, they were unsure about his date of birth, and they were unsure about his origin, whether it was Egyptian or Hebrew. They were feigning knowledge of future events, as Pharaoh was looking to them for direction. They couldn't say "we don't know". They would either lose their positions, or be killed. They therefore made general statements that had possibility of coming true, based on current events.

**Reader:** Similarly, how did Saul hear from his dream of Samuel correct information about his and his son's death in the coming war? And why would he have imagined hearing his teacher telling him he would die?

**Mesora:** Saul stated that he was grieved by the Phillistines' oppression, and that G-d had removed Himself from him. This shows that Saul was in a worried state. When one is in such a mind set, his dreams may follow his fears. This also applies to daydreams, which the Rabbis state Saul was experiencing. Why he actually was killed with his son, was due to his mind set. One not at ease, and with tremendous worry, will falter in his decisions, and Saul's decisions here were in war. His death, and his son's death were not foretold, rather, they were either results of his fears distorting his clear thinking, or G-d's punishment. Many times, what one fears is brought out in a nightmare as a method of dealing with the fear. This means that to move past the fear, one may construct a nightmare where he faces that fear, for the longer-term goal of not having that fear anymore. □



# Three Who Eat with No Torah Discussed

RABBI MOSHE BEN-CHAIM

Ethics 3:3: "Rabbi Shimone said, 'Three who ate at one table and do not discuss any Torah on it, it is as if they ate of sacrifices to the dead (idolatry).'"

According to Rabbi Shimone, what is so sinful about eating, in a group of three, with no Torah discussions? Why does the sin exist only when three ate together, but not two or one? Why is eating an essential component of this sin? Meaning, if three people convened for the sake of talk, but not eating, why would there be no sin?

It is evident that we must define the phenomena of eating, as well as the psychological dynamics present only once three people have gathered, and no less.

Psychologists, as well as our Rabbis, teach us that the appetitive (eating) and sexual are the two most powerful drives. For this reason, Maimonides grouped the laws of forbidden eating and forbidden relations into one category called "Kedusha", meaning sanctity or separateness. Kedusha is a state where man is in control of his passions, not the reverse. However, Kedusha is not a goal in itself, for if man would abstain from these forbidden actions, but never engage his mind in wisdom, his abstention is a futile endeavor. Abstention is but a prerequisite, enabling man to channel his energies towards higher goals. i.e., Torah study and fulfillment of the laws. Only the one who has mastered his passions, may redirect his energies. But one whose passions rule himself, cannot follow his mind. He is always driven to satisfy his lusts, thereby removing himself from higher activities.

Eating with others while no words of wisdom are exchanged is man acting in the sole capacity of "animal". He simply satisfies his desires, without placing them in perspective, i.e., a means to nourish his body so his mind may be free to study G-d's wisdom. In such a case, eating becomes an ends, and not a means. But why is one who satisfies his appetitive drive equated to an idolater? Is this not an extreme accusation? It is not. I believe the reason to be that in both cases (eating for eating's sake, and idolatry) man is allowing his drives to have free reign. It is not the act of eating per se which is equal to prostrating to an idol, but it is the freedom of emotional expression man allows himself, which is identical with the freedom of emotional expression displayed in bowing to stone gods. This is the equation. In the acts of idolatry and eating, man lets his drives run free. But also true, is that when such a person shows no restraint in his appetitive drives, he is now more prone to show no restraint in other areas, which include the religious sphere. Once a person's emotions are trained to run free, they will do so in many areas. Here we find a second explanation for Rabbi Shimone's words. Talmud Succah 52b discusses this matter: "Rabbi Yochanan said, 'Man possesses a small organ, if he starves it, it becomes full, if he feeds it, it becomes hungry.'" This means that the more man satisfies his sexual desires, the more inflamed will this desire become. But if he refrains as the Torah teaches, he will find he has less need to satisfy this desire, and he may then channel his energies towards higher pursuits. Such pursuits will enlighten him to intellectual truths, and offer him insight into a correct morality with which to rule society, and more justice will be enacted. Everyone benefits when man controls his passions. This statement of Rabbi Yochanan applies to other passions as well as the sexual.

Now we must understand why this act of eating with others equates to idolatry, only when three or more convene.

What are the psychological dynamics when one is alone? We can say he is functioning in a "subjective" mode. He has no one from whom he may receive agreement for his actions, so no judgment is passed. He may not feel right or wrong in his actions. There is no "check system" when alone. Now, what happens to these dynamics when he is with one other person? We may say again, he remains in a subjective framework. Although in the company of one other person, this individual feels that his companion is there for one reason: for

him. He is still the focus - even in this twosome. "He is here for me, as there are no others present" is his unconscious sentiment. Two eating with no words of Torah remains in a subjective framework.

However, when three people convene, the dynamics change drastically: At any given moment during their meal, the two others may discuss a matter among themselves, thereby rendering the first person no longer the center of attention. This first person sees there are matters which do not concern him. This is significant. As he sits alone, while the other two talk, even briefly, this first person is struck with the recognition that there are matters in which he is not involved. What does this awaken in him? He realizes the concept of "objectivity", meaning there are interests which others partake of, even when he does not. This teaches the first person that if others indulge in something, it objectifies, or condones such an activity. I believe this to be the core idea of Rabbi Shimone, that in a group of three or more, a new psychological phenomenon is born, which cannot exist in less numbers. The witnessing of "objective" behavior is only possible in a group of three. (We are not saying that this is the first time he becomes aware of this. We are merely describing the dynamics which always exist in such a scenario.)

Understanding human behavior, we can appreciate Rabbi Shimone's words: three who eat with no Torah are qualitatively more corrupt than two or one doing the same act. Attributing "objectivity", or societal allowance" to such an action, man internalizes this behavior and labels it as "permissible".

Most morality is absorbed by what we see others doing. This is of course a poor means for selecting a moral code, but it is how people operate who do not observe their actions, and don't strive to comply with Torah standards.

One person who sees two others doing any action, may accept such behavior as acceptable. This is where the corruption exists. When man eats alone or with one other - with no Torah - this act has not yet been objectified as acceptable behavior. But when one person eats with two others, and sees those two eating with no words of wisdom exchanged, he now incorporates such an act as objectively acceptable behavior, and the eating becomes an acceptable act in itself, a "good". Once eating attains this status, man's energies can partake with no guilt, feeling perfectly justified in indulging his drive, with the approval of others. Such unchecked and unrestrained outlet of his passions mirrors the same course leading one to idolatry, and sets the stage for additional outpouring of unrestrained emotion. This excites man's energy level in general, and removes him further from the sedate and tranquil state of mind required for Torah study, and moral discipline.

Additionally, we learn from Rabbi Shimone's equation between eating and idolatry, that both are equally easy to violate. One should not think idolatry as an archaic or primitive practice, far below the capability of today's "sophisticated and modern society". Rabbi Shimone teaches that just as man can err with regards to eating bereft of Torah, so too, one can commit idolatrous sins. Man is no less predisposed to violating idolatry, than overindulgence in eating.

I feel this lesson of Rabbi Shimone is an excellent response to those who mock the Torah. Many Jews are not observant, justifying their avoidance of Torah with claims that it is antiquated, inapplicable, or archaic. People look for ways to keep their cozy, free lifestyles even if it means acting with ignorance, as such claims display. Well, here we find a perfect example of how eternally true and insightful our Torah is, and our Rabbis are. Rabbi Shimone displays a keen understanding of human behavior, which does not change over the millennia.

If someone honestly wishes to live his life as happy and fulfilling as possible, the table of knowledge is set. G-d has ultimate knowledge. He has graciously imparted it to man embodied in Torah. All one needs to do is partake of this true "meal". ■