**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT SHEMOT**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

We read in Parashat Shemot of Moshe’s initial refusal to accept the mission assigned to him by God to confront Pharaoh and demand that he free *Benei Yisrael*. At one point in his exchange with God at the burning bush, Moshe expresses his fear that *Benei Yisrael* would not believe his claim that he was sent by the Almighty to free them (4:1). In response, God “equips” Moshe with supernatural acts that he would perform to prove his authenticity. These included Moshe’s hand becoming leprous, and then being instantly healed (4:6-7).

Rashi (4:6), based on the *Midrash Tanchuma*, famously viewed Moshe’s leprosy as a punishment of sorts. Moshe doubted *Benei Yisrael*’s faith, assuming that they would disregard his prophecy and deny his claim to have received a prophetic message. These allegations constituted a form of *lashon ha-ra* – negative speech – which is punishable with *tzara’at*, and thus Moshe’s hand contracted leprosy.

[Rav Amnon Bazak](https://www.facebook.com/amnon.d.bazak/photos/a.233235363479660.60990.233065886829941/559211867548673/?type=1&theater) noted that Moshe’s “punishment” could also be understood differently. We find two instances in *Tanakh* where *tzara’at* served as a punishment for placing oneself on too high a pedestal, assuming a position of stature that he or she did not deserve. Miriam contracted *tzara’at* for challenging Moshe’s unique status and insisting that he was on no higher a level than she was: “Did the Lord speak only with Moshe? Did He not also speak with us?” (Bamidbar 12:2). Centuries later, the Judean king Uziyahu was stricken with *tzara’at* after assuming for himself the right to serve as *kohen gadol* and offer incense in the *Beit Ha-mikdash* (Devarim Hayamim II 26:16-21). The common denominator between these two instances of *tzara’at* was that the victims failed to accept their current standing and assumed for themselves a higher stature than they rightfully deserved. They were therefore stricken with *tzara’at* and forced to live in isolation, symbolic of the lowest possible level of prominence.

Rav Bazak noted that Moshe here failed in the precise opposite direction. He assumed he was incompetent for the job assigned to him, that he could not possibly serve as God’s prophet and convince the people of the divine message. Whereas Miriam and Uziyahu saw themselves on a higher plane than where they really were, Moshe viewed himself on too low a plane. All three were stricken with *tzara’at* because they all failed to see themselves as they truly were. Moshe, of course, received a far lighter punishment – only his hand was afflicted, and only for a brief period of time – because his mistake was far less severe than that of Miriam or Uziyahu. Selling oneself short and failing to recognize one’s capabilities is not as grave an offense as the arrogant presumption of greatness. Nevertheless, we may learn from Moshe’s *tzara’at* that just as we must not see ourselves as something more than we are, we must also not see ourselves as something less than we are. We should try, as much as possible, to evaluate ourselves and our abilities with sheer honesty and objectivity, so we neither try to do that which is beyond our level, on the one hand, nor, on the other, avoid striving to achieve that which is well within our reach.

Sunday

As Moshe observed the plight of the Israelite slaves in Egypt, he came upon an Egyptian taskmaster beating a slave, whereupon he “turned this way and that and saw there was no man; he struck the Egyptian and buried him in the sand” (2:12).

The simple meaning of the verse, of course, is that Moshe looked around him to ensure nobody would witness his act. Rashi, however, citing the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:29), explains that Moshe prophetically looked into the future and saw that this taskmaster would not produce any offspring that would join *Benei Yisrael*. Once he felt assured that no potential converts would be lost if this taskmaster would be killed, Moshe beat him to death.

It appears that *Chazal* seek to clarify that Moshe did not react viscerally to the injustice that he saw. He acted with prudence, carefully weighing the potential long-term consequences of killing the Egyptian. Whereas the brevity of the text might give the impression that Moshe’s violent reaction was rash and impulsive, the Midrash insists that Moshe first thought carefully to ensure that this extreme course of action was warranted.

*Chazal* here convey to us the vital message that before we “strike” another – even in the figurative sense of the word – we must very carefully consider the long-term repercussions of this decision. Certainly, there are times when criticism and punitive measures are appropriate, but this decision must never be made as a visceral response to wrongdoing. We must first consider how the harsh words or punishment might affect the child or student in the long-term. Although we do not have the benefit of prophetic foresight as Moshe did, we must nevertheless use our common sense and sound judgment before “striking” to ensure that the desired effect will be achieved without long-term negative consequences.

(Based on [an article by Rav Ron Yitzchok Eisenman](http://ahavasisrael.org/torah/the_short_vort/4245/))

Monday

When God appeared to Moshe for the first time, at the burning bush, He began by commanding Moshe to remove his shoes, and then proclaimed, “I have assuredly seen the affliction of My nation which is in Egypt…” (3:7). He then explained to Moshe that he is to approach Pharaoh to demand the release of the Israelite slaves.

The Midrash, in a puzzling passage (*Shemot Rabba* 3:2), notes the seemingly redundant phrase “*ra’o ra’iti*” (generally translated as, “I have assuredly seen”) used by God as He began this prophecy. This term, the Midrash explains, alludes to different “visions.” God was telling Moshe, in the Midrash’s words, “You see one thing, but I see two things.” Moshe, the Midrash proceeds to explain, could see only *Ma’amad Har Sinai*, the time when *Benei Yisrael* would receive the Torah on Mount Sinai, the site where this prophecy occurred. But the Almighty saw not only this event, but also the tragedy that unfolded forty days later, when *Benei Yisrael* betrayed God and worshipped the golden calf.

Many writers have struggled to explain why God would mention the sin of the golden calf in this context. This is His first prophecy to Moshe, when He assigns Moshe his mission of leading *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt, to Mount Sinai, and then to the Land of Israel. Why would God bring to mind the golden calf?

In these verses, God expresses to Moshe His concern and affection for *Benei Yisrael*: “I have assuredly seen the affliction of My nation…and I have heard their cries from their oppressors, and indeed know of their pain. I have thus come down to save them from Egypt and bring them from that land to a good, spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey… And now, the cries of the Israelites have come to Me…” God speaks of *Benei Yisrael* as a parent speaks of his or her child, troubled by the child’s pain and desperately seeking to help. It appears that *Chazal* seek to draw our attention to the fact – as obvious as this fact is – that God spoke this way even as He was keenly aware of the grave mistakes *Benei Yisrael* would make in the future. Even as He lovingly announces their imminent redemption, He knows what the future would bring, including their betrayal with the worship of the calf, which *Chazal* elsewhere compare to a bride betraying her groom at their wedding. This knowledge did not undermine in any way God’s affection for *Benei Yisrael* or His commitment to relieve their suffering and lead them towards a glorious future in *Eretz Yisrael*. Even though He knew everything about the future of *Benei Yisrael* – both their unbridled devotion at *Matan Torah* and their shameful betrayal with the worship of the calf – He was committed to releasing them from Egypt and bringing them to their ancestral homeland.

The Midrash thus reminds us that we fully capable of loving, caring for and cherishing our fellow Jews despite their faults and shortcomings. We should not reserve our affection and generosity for those whom we regard as perfect or near perfect. Just as God lovingly came to help *Benei Yisrael* despite knowing ahead of time of the golden calf, we, too, must be prepared to help and care for our fellow Jews even when we see their flaws and deficiencies. All people can be viewed from two vantage points; we all have our moments of greatness and moments of shame. The Midrash here challenges us to follow God’s example of kindness and generosity even to those whose negative qualities are discernible, focusing our attention upon their favorable characteristics and ensuring to see all the good within them.

Tuesday

Yesterday, we noted the surprising comments of the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 3:2) in explaining the beginning of God’s prophecy to Moshe at the burning bush. After first introducing Himself to Moshe and ordering him to remove his shoes, God proclaims, “*Ra’o ra’iti et oni ami asher be-Mitzrayim*” – “I have assuredly seen the affliction of My nation which is in Egypt…” (3:7). Drawing upon the poetic expression “*ra’o ra’iti*,” the Midrash explains that God told Moshe, “You see one thing, but I see two things.” God told Moshe that he sees only *Benei Yisrael*’s acceptance of the Torah at Mount Sinai, but God sees beyond that, to the unfortunate incident of the golden calf which occurred forty days later. The question naturally arises as to why, according to the Midrash, God finds it necessary to make mention of the golden calf at this point, when He first assigns Moshe to his destined role as leader of *Benei Yisrael*.

When people embark on a project or enterprise, we often tend to view “one thing,” and see only “*Matan Torah*” – the success that we desire. We dream of a smooth, bump-free road, a journey that will require hard work and effort but will lead us to where we need to go without obstacles or detours. A couple that gets married anticipates a blissful marriage without tensions; a couple expecting their first child dreams of a happy, healthy, well-behaved son or daughter who brings them unbridled joy and delight; a person starting his or her career looks forward to a stable source of income and steady and fulfilling work. The Midrash here perhaps seeks to remind us of the uncomfortable reality that nearly every journey we take will include both “*Matan Torah*” and “*cheit ha-eigel*” – moments of success and gratification, and moments of disappointment and angst. As God uttered the very first words introducing Moshe’s role as leader, *Chazal* step in to point out that Moshe’s mission would bring both joy and frustration; he would lead the people to the highest peak of spiritual achievement, to the declaration of “*na’aseh ve-nishma*” and the beholding of God’s revelation, but would also see them fall to the depths of idolatry less than six weeks later. As with virtually every job and every undertaking, Moshe’s role would bring both great satisfaction and great disappointment.

The purpose of conveying this message is not to cause us to despair, but to the contrary, to inject us with a mature and healthy sense of resilience and confidence. The inevitable setbacks that we experience in any area of life must not discourage us or break our spirits. Even Moshe Rabbenu suffered setbacks in his role as prophet and leader, perhaps none greater than the golden calf. We must recognize that there are bumps along every road we take in life, but journeying on these roads brings us great fulfillment and gratification. *Chazal* here remind us to anticipate the occasional “golden calf,” the moments of disappointments and frustration, and to work to overcome them with confidence and conviction, rather than allowing them to block our lifelong journey towards success, joy and satisfaction.

Wednesday

The Torah in Parashat Shemot tells the famous story of Moshe fatally striking an Egyptian taskmaster whom he witnessed beating an Israelite slave. We read that after Moshe killed the taskmaster, he “buried him in the sand” (2:12).

The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:31) explains the term “*chol*” (“sand”) in this verse as an allegorical reference to *Benei Yisrael*. Moshe buried the taskmaster among *Benei Yisrael*, feeling confident that the secret of what happened would be kept with them. He felt secure, the Midrash explains, because *Benei Yisrael* have been compared to sand. Unlike other materials such as rocks and sticks, sand does not make noise as it moves or is shifted. Similarly, Moshe felt that *Benei Yisrael* could be trusted with the sensitive information of his killing the taskmaster, as they were not, by nature, disposed to gossip. Unfortunately, it took just one or several gossips who broke from this tradition and spread the news, which eventually reached the ears of Pharaoh.

Another Midrashic source, cited in [*Torah Sheleima* (note 106)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=51451&st=&pgnum=95), takes the association between sand and silence in a different direction. According to this passage, which appears in one version of the *Tanchuma Yashan*, the “sand” alludes to the fact that “*Yisrael* go from place to place, from exile to exile, and do not produce a sound.” Despite all the tribulations *Benei Yisrael* endure, they place they trust in the Almighty and do not complain. They remain silent, like the sand, patiently accepting God’s decrees and trusting that a happier future awaits them.

These two Midrashic passages point to the two types of “noise” that people often make but which we need to avoid: spreading negative information about others, and complaints. The common denominator between these two forms of speech is negativity, focusing on what is wrong, either with others or with our lives. Drawing upon the special silent quality of sand, *Chazal* here urge us to approach people and our lives generally with a positive, hopeful outlook, to focus our attention on all that is good about the people around us, about the world and about life, rather than constantly speaking about all that is wrong with them.

Thursday

Many different approaches have been suggested to explain the symbolic significance of the burning thorn bush where God relayed His first prophecy to Moshe. The fact that the bush was ablaze but was not consumed had the effect of catching Moshe’s attention, but many writers searched for the possible deeper meaning and significance of this image.

The *Keli Yakar* creatively suggests that the thorn bush serves as an unflattering symbol of *Benei Yisrael*. As indicated by the story of the two quarreling slaves whom Moshe confronted, *Benei Yisrael* were beset by internal strife during the period of bondage. They lived as a “thorn bush,” with the people “pricking” and causing harm to one another. God thus showed Moshe a raging fire that was incapable of consuming a dry, flammable thorn bush, to draw his attention to the painful absurdity of his nation’s condition. We would expect that the “fire” to which the people were subjected, the pain, humiliation and torment of slavery, would have the effect of “consuming” the “thorns,” of bringing them together so they could help and support each other. Alas, the “thorns” were not consumed. The envy and enmity among *Benei Yisrael* remained intact, even amid the “fire” of persecution and suffering.

It is worth noting that God, as the Torah describes, appeared to Moshe “*mi-tokh ha-sneh*” – from within the thorn bush. He came to lead them to freedom even within the “thorns,” despite the people’s unworthiness. The image of the burning bush was shown to Moshe not to cause him despair, but to show him the challenges that needed to be overcome for the redemption to unfold. God was ready to redeem the people even in their current condition, provided that they worked to eliminate the “thorns” of strife and hostility.

One of the “signs” which God gives to Moshe with which he would prove his prophetic status to the people was that his hand would become leprous, and would then be healed. Rav David Moskowitz, in his [*Gelilei Zahav*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=31135&st=&pgnum=122), suggests that Moshe’s leprous hand hearkens back to his encounter with the two quarreling slaves many years earlier. Rashi (2:14), citing the Midrash, comments that when Moshe realized that his fellow Israelites spread the news about his killing an Egyptian taskmaster, he concluded that this was the reason for the nation’s suffering – because they shared secret information about one another. Upon seeing the unfortunate state of friction and disunity among the people, Moshe determined that this must be to blame for their persecution. *Tzara’at* is traditionally seen as the punishment for *lashon ha-ra* – negative speech about people – and thus Moshe’s leprous hand might perhaps reflect this scourge of tale-bearing that plagued *Benei Yisrael* at the time. By making Moshe’s hand leprous and then immediately healing it, God wanted to show Moshe that this ill could be cured. As quarrelsome and difficult as the people were at the time, they could still be changed. This reassurance was vital for Moshe as he accepted the mantle of leadership and set out to prepare and lead the people to freedom.

We must never despair when the “thorns” never seem to be “consumed,” when we see moral and spiritual ills continue to plague our nation with no end in sight. In God’s very first prophecy to Moshe, He showed him that every one of these ills can be cured, that change is possible. Rarely, if ever, does the change occur as swiftly as Moshe’s leprous hand was healed, but we must firmly believe that it is possible and within our reach, that ultimately, the “thorns” of selfishness, jealousy and hostility will be eliminated, and we will again become the worthy heirs of God’s covenant to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov.

Friday

Parashat Shemot ends with Moshe’s protest to God in the wake of Pharaoh’s edict requiring the Israelite slaves to find their own straw for producing bricks. God had sent Moshe to approach Pharaoh and demand that he release *Benei Yisrael*, and Pharaoh responded by intensifying the labor, announcing that straw would no longer be provided. Exasperated, Moshe turned to God and cried, “Why have You done evil to this nation? For what reason did You send me? Since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name, he has done more evil to this nation, and You did not save Your nation!” (5:23). Rashi, commenting on the next verse, writes – based on the Midrash – that God was angered by Moshe’s harsh words of protest and his questioning divine justice. God at that point declared that although Moshe would see the downfall of Pharaoh and *Benei Yisrael*’s freedom from bondage, he would not live to see their conquest of *Eretz Yisrael*.

The Midrash elsewhere (*Shemot Rabba* 23) relates that Moshe later corrected his mistake. After the splitting of the sea, Moshe leads *Benei Yisrael* in singing the “*Az Yashir*” song of praise to God, and the Midrash draws an association with the word “*az*” in the introduction of that song and Moshe’s complaint to God here in Parashat Shemot: “*U-mei’****az*** *bati el Pharaoh*…” The Midrash comments that Moshe said to God, “I sinned with ‘*az*,’ and now I give praise to You with ‘*az*’.” Moshe used the same word when he began praising God that he used when he had complained to God, indicating that he was now correcting the mistake he had made when he challenged God’s justice.

The Midrash here conveys the message that the way to counteract negativity is through positivity. If we find ourselves naturally inclined to express dissatisfaction and criticize, then we should be working to reverse this tendency by giving compliments and praise. As frail and imperfect beings, we will, almost invariably, have occasions when we complain and protest. Even Moshe, the greatest prophet who ever lived, could not bear to see *Benei Yisrael*’s torment and felt compelled to cry out to God in bitter protest. *Chazal* teach us, however, that we need to try to overcome this natural, ingrained tendency through “*Az Yashir*,” by effusively complimenting, praising, thanking and appreciating all that is good in life. The more effort we invest in “*Az Yashir*,” in expressing a positive outlook, the better able we will be to resist the natural tendency of “*u-mei’az bati el Pharaoh*,” to complain about life’s difficulties and disappointments.