

*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"—and 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)

*Moses spoke before G-d, saying: "Behold, the children of Israel have not listened to me; how then shall Pharaoh listen to me?" (6:12)*

The previous verse, however, states the reason that the children of Israel did not listen to Moses—"because of their anguish of spirit and their 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)

*Amram took Yocheved, his father's sister, as a 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 it over the community. (As was the case with King David, who was descended from the seemingly legally questionable marriage of Boaz and Ruth.)

(Chizkuni)

*Aaron took Elisheva, the daughter of Aminadav, sister of Nachshon, as a 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 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 threw down his rod, and they turned into snakes (7:10–12)*

Pharaoh began to mock them and crow at them like a chicken, saying to them: "So these are 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 brine 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)

*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)

*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 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)

*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 affected only Egyptian territory, and thus the Ethiopians knew what was not theirs.

(Midrash Rabbah)

*[The frogs] will go up and come into your house, into your bedchamber, 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, “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)

*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 the L-rd 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 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)

*G-d hardened the heart of Pharaoh, and he did not listen to them (9:12)*

Following each of the first five plagues, it is written, "Pharaoh hardened his heart"; regarding the sixth plague it says, "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)

The hardening of Pharaoh's heart is referred to no less than twenty times in the course of the story of the Exodus. Sometimes it is Pharaoh who is said to harden his heart. At other times, God is said to have done so. The Torah uses three different verbs in this context: *ch-z-k*, to strengthen, *k-sh-h*, to harden, and *k-b-d*, to make heavy.

Throughout the ages, the commentators have been concerned with one problem. If God hardened Pharaoh's heart, how could he have been to blame for not letting the Israelites go? He had no choice in the matter. It was God's doing, not his. That he and his people should be punished seems to flout the fundamental principle of justice, that we are guilty only for what we have freely chosen to do.

However, the commentators noted that for the first five plagues, Pharaoh is said to harden his own heart. The obstinacy, the refusal, the intransigence are his. Only with the sixth plague is God said to have done so. This led to several explanations.

Rashi says that the hardening of Pharaoh's heart in the last five plagues was *a punishment for the first five*, when it was Pharaoh's own obstinacy that led him to refuse to let the people go.<sup>[1]</sup> Maimonides interprets God's hardening of Pharaoh's heart as meaning that "*repentance was withheld from him*, and the liberty to turn from his wickedness was not accorded to him."<sup>[2]</sup> Albo and Sforno offer the opposite interpretation. God hardened Pharaoh's heart precisely *to restore his free will*. After the succession of plagues that had devastated the land, Pharaoh was under overwhelming pressure to let the Israelites go. Had he done so, it would not have been out of free choice, but rather under *force majeure*. God therefore *strengthened* Pharaoh's heart so that even after the first five plagues he was genuinely free to say Yes or No.<sup>[3]</sup>

(Rabbi Jonathan Sacks)

*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 away from Pharaoh, out of the city, 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)

*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 like a reed, and let him never be unyielding like the cedar.

(Talmud, Taanit 20b)

*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](#)): "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)