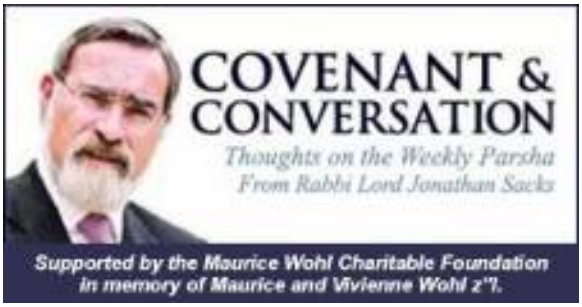
In this Issue



Of Lice and Men

> Throughout all Egypt the dust turned into lice. But when the magicians tried to produce lice by their secret arts, they could not. The lice attacked men and animals alike. The magicians said to Pharaoh, 'This is the finger of God.' But Pharaoh's heart was hard and he would not listen

Too little attention has been paid to the use of humour in the Torah. Its most important form is the use of satire to mock the pretensions of human beings who think they can emulate God. One thing makes God laugh - the sight of humanity attempting to defy heaven:

> The kings of the earth take their stand, And the rulers gather together against the Lord and His anointed one. "Let us break our chains," they say, "and throw off their fetters." He who sits in heaven laughs, God scoffs at them. (Psalm 2:2-4)

There is a marvellous example in the story of the Tower of Babel. The people in the plain of Shinar decide to build a city with a tower that "will reach heaven." This is an act of defiance against the divinely given order of nature ("The heavens are the heavens of God: the earth He has given to the children of men"). The Torah then says, "But God came down to see the city and the tower ..." Down on earth, the builders thought their tower would reach heaven. From the vantage point of heaven, however, it was so miniscule that God had to "come down" to see it.

Satire is essential to understanding at least some of the plagues. The Egyptians worshipped a multiplicity of gods, most of whom represented forces of nature. By their "secret arts" the magicians believed that they could control these forces. Magic is the equivalent in an era of myth to technology in an age of science. A civilization that believes it can manipulate the gods, believes likewise that it can exercise coercion over human beings. In such a culture, the concept of freedom is unknown.

The plagues were not merely intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed ("I will perform acts of judgement against all the gods of Egypt: I am God", Ex. 12:12). This explains the first and last of the nine plagues prior to the killing of the firstborn. The first involved the Nile. The ninth was the plague of darkness. The Nile was worshipped as the source of fertility in an otherwise desert region. The sun was seen as the greatest of the gods, Re, whose child Pharaoh was considered to be. Darkness meant the eclipse of the sun, showing that even the greatest of the Egyptian gods could do nothing in the face of the true God.

What is at stake in this confrontation is the difference between myth - in which the gods are mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated - and biblical monotheism in which ethics (justice, compassion, human dignity) constitute the meeting-point of God and mankind. That is the key to the first two plagues, both of which refer back to the beginning of Egyptian persecution of the Israelites: the killing of male children at birth, first through the midwives (though, thanks to Shifra and Puah's moral sense, this was foiled) then by throwing them into the Nile to drown. That is why, in the first plague, the river waters turn to blood. The significance of the second, frogs, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. Heqt, the frog-goddess, represented the midwife who assisted women in labour. Both plagues are coded messages meaning: "If you use the river and midwives - both normally associated with life - to

bring about death, those same forces will turn against you." An immensely significant message is taking shape: Reality has an ethical structure. If used for evil ends, the powers of nature will turn against man, so that what he does will be done to him in turn. There is justice in history.

The response of the Egyptians to these first two plagues is to see them within their own frame of reference. Plagues, for them, are forms of magic, not miracles. To Pharaoh's "magicians", Moses and Aaron are people like themselves who practice "secret arts". So they replicate them: they show that they too can turn water into blood and generate a horde of frogs. The irony here is very close to the surface. So intent are the Egyptian magicians on proving that they can do what Moses and Aaron have done, that they entirely fail to realise that far from making matters better for the Egyptians, they are making them worse: more blood, more frogs.

This brings us to the third plague, lice. One of the purposes of this plague is to produce an effect which the magicians cannot replicate. They try. They fail. Immediately they conclude, "This is the finger of God".

This is the first appearance in the Torah of an idea, surprisingly persistent in religious thinking even today, called "the god of the gaps". This holds that a miracle is something for which we cannot yet find a scientific explanation. Science is natural; religion is supernatural. An "act of God" is something we cannot account for rationally. What magicians (or technocrats) cannot reproduce must be the result of Divine intervention. This leads inevitably to the conclusion that religion and science are opposed. The more we can explain scientifically or control technologically, the less need we have for faith. As the scope of science expands, the place of God progressively diminishes to vanishing point.

What the Torah is intimating is that this is a pagan mode of thought, not a Jewish one. The Egyptians admitted that Moses and Aaron were genuine prophets when they performed wonders beyond the scope of their own magic. But this is not why we believe in Moses and Aaron. On this, Maimonides is unequivocal:

> Israel did not believe in Moses our teacher because of the signs he performed. When faith is predicated on signs, a lurking doubt always remains that these signs may have been performed with the aid of occult arts and witchcraft. All the signs Moses performed in the wilderness, he did because they were necessary, not to authenticate his status as a prophet ... When we needed food, he brought down manna. When the people were thirsty, he cleaved the rock. When Korach's supporters denied his authority, the earth swallowed them up. So too with all the other signs. What then were our grounds for believing in him? The revelation at Sinai, in which we saw with our own eyes and heard with our own ears ... (Hilkhot Yesodei haTorah 8:1).

The primary way in which we encounter God is not through miracles but through His word - the revelation - Torah - which is the Jewish people's constitution as a nation under the sovereignty of God. To be sure, God is in the events which, seeming to defy nature, we call miracles. But He is also in nature itself. Science does not displace God: it reveals, in ever more intricate and wondrous ways, the design within nature itself. Far from diminishing our religious sense, science (rightly understood) should enlarge it, teaching us to see "How great are Your works, O God; You have made them all with wisdom." Above all, God is to be found in the voice heard at Sinai, teaching us how to construct a society that will be the opposite of Egypt: in which the few do not enslave the many, nor are strangers mistreated.

The best argument against the world of ancient Egypt was Divine humor. The cultic priests and magicians who thought they could control the sun and the Nile discovered that they could not even produce a louse. Pharaohs like Ramses II demonstrated their godlike status by creating monumental architecture: the great temples, palaces and pyramids whose immensity seemed to betoken divine grandeur (the Gemara explains that Egyptian magic could not function on very small things). God mocks them by revealing His presence in the tiniest of creatures (T. S. Eliot: "I will show you fear in a handful of dust").

What the Egyptian magicians (and their latter-day successors) did not understand is that power over nature is not an end in itself but solely the means to ethical ends. The lice were God's joke at the expense of the magicians who believed that because they controlled the forces of nature, they were the masters of human destiny. They were wrong. Faith is not

merely belief in the supernatural. It is the ability to hear the call of the Author of Being, to be free in such a way as to respect the freedom and dignity of others.

The Fifth Cup

Moshe's initial attempt to liberate the people seemed to have had the opposite result: instead of winning their freedom, the misery had increased. Moshe questions God. What happened to the assurances he was given at the Burning Bush? Why have things regressed? How and when will they be freed? In response, God provides Moshe with new assurances, and tells him to transmit these assurances to the people:

> Therefore say to the People of Israel, 'I am God, and I will bring you out from under the burden of Egypt, and I will save you from their slavery, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments. And I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God; and you shall know that I am the Almighty your God, who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you in to the land which I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov; and I will give it to you for a heritage; I am God.' (Shmot 6:6-8)

These verses contain what has become known as the 'four expressions of redemption'. The Jerusalem Talmud[1] associates[2] these expressions with the four cups of wine that punctuate the various parts of the Haggada and around which the Pesach Seder is constructed.[3]

> From where do we derive the Four Cups? Rebbi Yochanan said in the name of Rav B'naya, 'These parallel the four redemptions: "Therefore say to the People of Israel, I am God, and I will bring you out ... And I will take you to me for a People...;" etc.; 'bring', 'save', 'redeem', 'take'. (Jerusalem Talmud Pesachim 68b)

Despite the familiarity of this teaching, some may find it disingenuous: In order to arrive at the desired number four, in order to create a parallel between the verses which promise liberation and the four cups of the Seder, a fifth expression is 'edited out': The verses quoted above constitute what appears to be one organic divine statement, yet the last expression, "And I will bring you in to the land", is ignored.

This problem was addressed by Rabbi Yosef Soloveitchik, who differentiated between two different themes in these verses, and ascribed them to different events in the Jewish calendar, ritual and liturgy: Pesach commemorates the Exodus, and the Seder is an educational tool to teach us about the experience of slavery in Egypt and our miraculous salvation. This is the subject of the first four expressions, but not the fifth. The fifth expression addresses a different phase in our history. There is no reason to mention our conquest of the Land of Israel during the Seder; this is a different aspect of the biblical narrative, commemorated by a different holiday (Shavuot), in different liturgy and ritual (the Bringing of the First Fruits). For this reason, the last verse is "disconnected" from the others. Although all five expressions comprise one unified communiqu?, God's message to Moshe and the nation is truncated in the sages' analysis, and the fifth expression, the "Shavuot" expression, is suppressed.

On the other hand, the purpose of the Exodus from Egypt was never merely geographical. The Jews were not freed from bondage in order to become nomads. Their freedom, as well as their enslavement, served a greater purpose. For this reason, from the outset, Moshe was entrusted with a task that went beyond the physical extrication of the Children of Israel from Egypt. As Moshe was told at the moment God first informed him of his task, their true freedom would involve more than a relocation or political emancipation. The purpose of the Exodus was to bring the Jewish People to Mount Sinai, where they would serve God.[4]

> And he said, 'For I will be with you; and this shall be a sign to you,

> that I have sent you: When you bring forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God upon this mountain. (Shmot 3:12)

For millennia, this has been the Jewish definition of true freedom:

> And it says, 'And the Tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the Tablets.' Read not harut [which means graven] but herut [which means freedom]. For there is no free man but he that occupies himself with the study of the Torah. (Mishne Avot 6:2)

It is an axiom of rabbinic thought that true freedom is possible only through receiving the Torah, an event we commemorate, celebrate and renew on Shavuot. Among the sages there are those, including Rabbi David Pardo, who opine that true freedom was achieved only when the Jews entered the Land of Israel, for freedom includes religious and political autonomy.[5] Nonetheless, the fifth expression of freedom that is the basis for this view seems to have been purposefully left out of the Exodus story told at the Seder. The rabbinic mainstream separated between the four expressions of redemption that lie at the heart of the Pesach Seder, the ultimate re-telling of the liberation story, and the fifth expression which involves inheriting the Land of Israel. Thus, even though the Talmud Bavli does not connect the four expressions of liberation with the Seder's four cups, the Mishna's instruction that four cups are to be consumed is left as an uncontested rule of law.

> On the eve of Pesach close to minha a man must not eat until nightfall. Even the poorest man in Israel must not eat [on the night of Pesach] until he reclines [at the Seder table]; and they should give him not less than four cups [of wine], even [if he is supported by] charity. (Talmud Bavli Pesachim 99b)

In fact, many traditions seem to indicate that the Talmud Bavli did speak of a fifth cup at the Seder:[6]

> Our Rabbis taught: On the fourth [cup] he concludes the Hallel and recites the great Hallel. (Talmud Bavli Pesachim 118a)

While our texts of the Talmud read that the Hallel is recited over the fourth cup of wine, many early commentaries, the Rambam among them, apparently had a different text:[7]

> He should pour the fifth cup and say upon it the great Hallel. (Rambam Laws of Chametz and Matzah Chapter 8)

The fifth expression of redemption is alive and well in the versions of the Talmud that were current and common through the late Middle Ages; many mainstream commentaries taught that the Hallel is recited on a fifth cup, while others taught that the fifth cup is optional.[8] In many communities, a "compromise" was forged between the traditions that reflected the variance in Talmudic texts, whereby the fifth cup is poured but not consumed. This fifth cup is known today as the "Cup of Eliyahu", perhaps because the Prophet Eliyahu will resolve the underlying textual dispute,[9] or because of the symbolism of the fifth expression of redemption as it relates to Eliyahu, the harbinger of the future redemption in which all Jews will be brought to the Land of Israel.[10] In either case, the fifth expression of redemption, the final verse in God's assurances to Moshe, is not set aside completely; it remains part of the same organic speech to Moshe that was transmitted to the Children of Israel in Egypt - and to all of their descendents, throughout the generations - in the context of the process of liberation and redemption. As such, this fifth expression is preserved in the Pesach Seder.[11]

A deeper analysis of God's assurances to Moshe may resolve this issue, and help us determine whether the verses contain five distinct statements - or only four. First, we should broaden our parameters somewhat and consider the context of these verses. The expressions of redemption are introduced as God tells Moshe that He has not forgotten the covenant forged with the Patriarchs:

> And I have also established my covenant with them, to give them the Land of Canaan, the land of their sojourning, in which they sojourned. And I have also heard the groaning of the People of Israel, whom the Egyptians keep in

> slavery; and I have remembered my covenant. (Shmot 6:4-5)

Rashi explains that God is referring to the covenant first made with Avraham, known as the Brit Bein Hab'tarim, the Covenant of the Pieces.[12]

> And when the sun was going down, a deep sleep fell upon Avram; and, lo, a fear of great darkness fell upon him. And he said to Avram, 'Know for a certainty that your seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and [they] shall enslave them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great wealth.' (Bereishit 15:12-14)

Rashi makes this statement in a general sense, and does not attempt to match each promise made to Avraham with the assurances received by Moshe. That task was left to Rabbi Shlomo Ephraim ben Aaron Luntschitz, in his work Kli Yakar.[13] There, he explains that the four expressions of freedom precisely parallel God's covenant with Avraham, the vision that mapped out the history of the Jewish People. Avraham was informed that his descendants would suffer exile, slavery and persecution. The very core of this affliction is the isolation and estrangement that results from becoming distanced from the shechina. This is what it means to be a stranger, to feel isolated; it is this estrangement that is described in the verse "strangers in a land that is not theirs." This initial stage is followed by slavery; the spiritual disconnection is what makes the slavery possible. Surely, not every stranger is enslaved; this second stage represented a more extreme level of affliction, a deepening of the existential crisis that Avraham's descendents would experience. This second stage is described to Avraham in the verse "and [they] shall enslave them". A third stage is foretold: Even more than 'regular' slavery was the extreme torture and abuse meted by the Egyptians, which is represented by the phrase "and they shall afflict them."

The redemption may be seen as a stage-by-stage reversal of each of these levels, with the most pressing need addressed and corrected first: When God addresses Moshe with the various expressions of redemption; He first gives redress to the affliction, to their acute and unprecedented physical affliction. The first thing God tells Moshe is that He will save the Children of Israel from suffering: "I will bring you out from under the burden of Egypt". The next expression addresses the second stage: "I will save you from their slavery". The next expression of redemption, "I will redeem you", addresses the physical exile of the Jewish People.

Taking the Kli Yakar's model in a slightly different direction, we might suggest that this third element should focus on the end of the verse:

> I will redeem you with an outstretched arm, and with great judgments. (Shmot 6:6)

God assures Moshe that the Exodus will be accompanied by a process of judgment of their oppressors. This same assurance is found in God's covenant with Avraham:

> And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge; and afterward shall they come out with great wealth. (Bereishit 15:14)

The final expression of redemption addresses the metaphysical distress of estrangement: "And I will take you to me for a People, and I will be to you a God". The uniqueness of this nation of erstwhile slaves will be made apparent to the world. Pharaoh and all of Egypt will finally understand the unique relationship that God has with the descendents of Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. The reason for the suffering, the hardship, the exile and torture, will become apparent as the Jews march out of slavery toward their destiny as God's chosen nation.

This fourth expression stands alone, in a verse unto itself, and the terminology used to express this assurance is noteworthy: The word with which God describes the realization of Israel's uniqueness is "ve'lakachti", the very same term used in the context of marriage.[14] When God says that He will "take" us as a people, the language used to describe this special, unique relationship is reminiscent of marriage. In effect, when God gives Moshe this assurance, when He says "ve'lakachti", the overtones that we hear, the echoes that reverberate through the text, seem to say "Harei at mekudeshet li". This phrase, which creates the legal status of marriage, demarcates and creates a unique, holy bond. The literal translation of this phrase, "I am making you holy to me", is the core of the relationship between man and wife, as well as between God and the Jewish

People. This unique relationship, promised to Moshe and to all of the Jewish slaves, was consummated at Sinai.[15]

> Now therefore, if you will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then you shall be my own treasure among all peoples; for all the earth is mine. And you shall be to me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which you shall speak to the People of Israel. And Moshe came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the Almighty commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, 'All that the Almighty has spoken we will do.' And Moshe returned the words of the people to God. (Shmot 19:5-8)

We may say, then, that the first three expressions of redemption were used describe the Exodus, while the fourth term describes the realization of the true and complete emancipation of the Jewish People, as they stand at Sinai and are betrothed to God. This is parallel to the Brit bein Habtarim, the covenant between God and Avraham; it is in that covenant that God spells out the path of exile, slavery, affliction, but it is also the covenant that lays the basis for Avraham's chosenness, and for the unique destiny of all of Avraham's descendents.[16]

But what of the fifth expression of redemption - "And I will bring you in to the land I swore to give to Avraham, to Yitzchak, and to Yaakov; and I will give it to you for a heritage; I am God"? The reference to the covenant forged with the Patriarchs is explicit - as explicit as the promise of the Land of Israel is in the Brit bein Habtarim:

> 'But in the fourth generation they shall come here again; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full.' And it came to pass, that, when the sun went down, and it was dark, behold a smoking furnace, and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. In the same day the Almighty made a covenant with Avram, saying, 'To your seed have I given this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates. (Bereishit 15:16-18)

Indeed, we may say that the main focus of that covenant was that Avraham and his descendants would one day inherit the Land of Israel. Their sojourn in Egypt and their travels through the desert were merely the path that they would take in order to become God's nation and receive the Land. The ultimate expression of freedom, then, is the fifth expression of redemption in God's assurances to Moshe: the Jews will inherit the Holy Land, the Land of Israel. Only then, only there, can the People of Israel attain the highest level of freedom. This may be seen as ultimate expression of the sanctity of the union between a husband and wife: their union is not complete until they establish their home together and live together. While their relationship is unique and holy as soon as the "Harei at mekudeshet li" is uttered, the full realization of their unique bond occurs when they live together. So, too, the covenant with the descendents of Avraham is fully realized only when the Children of Israel reside in their own home, in perfect union with God.

These same stages of redemption may be found in the eschatological vision of the Prophet Yechezkel:[17]

> For thus says the Almighty God: 'Behold, I will search my sheep, and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock in the day when he is among his sheep that are scattered; so will I seek out my sheep, and will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered in the cloudy and dark day. And I will bring them out from among the peoples, and gather them from the countries, and I will bring them to their own land, and feed them upon the mountains of Israel by the rivers, and in all the inhabited places of the country. I will feed them in a good pasture, and upon the high mountains of Israel shall their fold be; there shall they lie in a good pasture, and in a fat grazing land shall they feed upon the mountains of Israel. I will feed my flock, and I will cause them to lie down,' said the Almighty God. (Yechezkel 34:11-15)

This vision of the messianic age describes the ingathering of the exiles and their return to the Land of Israel. Yechezkel's vision is one of peace and tranquility, with God as our shepherd. The symbolic language gives voice to the Jewish vision of true freedom - freedom from tyranny, from foreign rule, from evil. This is the very same vision symbolized by another cup of wine - the cup of our future salvation.

> I will raise the cup of salvation, and call upon the name of God. (Psalm 115:13)

The Measure of Goodness

Moses' first visit to Pharaoh did not turn out exactly as he had expected. As the messenger of God, he had hoped to convince Pharaoh to release the Jewish people from bondage. But Pharaoh responded with disdain, "Moshe and Aharon, why are you making trouble? The people have work to do, and you're only getting in the way." Then Pharaoh had turned the screws of bondage even tighter. He decreed that the people had to go out and procure their own building materials, but the quota expected of them would not be lowered.

Moshe was upset, and he said to Hashem (*Shemos* 5:22), "My Master, why have You treated these people badly? Why did You send me on this mission?"

God took exception to Moshe's questions and rebuked him. "I am Hashem. I appeared to Avraham, to Yitzchak and to Yaakov, and they never questioned Me. I promised Avraham the entire land of Israel, yet he could not find a grave for his wife Sarah until he paid a high price for a burial ground. Did he complain? Did he question Me? I told Yitzchak to live in this land, that I would give it to him and his descendants, yet in order to find water he had to wrangle with the Philistine shepherds. Did he complain? Did he question Me? I promised Yaakov the entire land, yet he was unable to find a place to pitch his tent until he bought a place from Chamor ben Shechem for one hundred *kesitas*. Did he complain? Did he question Me? Only you had complaints, Moshe. Only you questioned Me. What a loss the patriarchs are to Me. What an irreplaceable loss!"

The patriarchs had also experienced adverse conditions. They had also had times when things did not go as well as they might have expected. But they never complained. They never questioned Hashem. Moshe did, and Hashem rebuked him for it.

If we think into it more deeply, however, it would seem that there is an important difference between Moshe and the patriarchs. They were private citizens, so to speak, individuals who were having a hard time. True, the promises they received from Hashem involved a future nation, but at the time they experienced their hardships, there was no nation as yet. Only they themselves were affected. Therefore, the patriarchs could, in all good conscience, suffer in silence and not complain.

Moshe, however, was the leader of an entire nation, responsible for the welfare of millions of people. It was his duty to advocate for them, to fight for their welfare, to complain when things did not go well for them. Why then did Hashem rebuke him? What did he do wrong?

When the Jewish people sinned with the Golden Calf, Moshe argued for their survival, otherwise, he said, "Erase me from Your book." And Hashem did not object. When Moshe came to their defense again and again in the desert, Hashem did not object. Why did He object now?

The answer lies in Moshe's choice of words. "My Master," he said, "why have You treated these people badly?" He characterized Hashem's actions as "bad." This was his mistake. True, it was his responsibility to advocate for the Jewish people. True, it was his responsibility to complain to Hashem when things did not go well for them. But at the same time, he had to recognize that everything Hashem did was good. All he could do was ask that it become better. In his position, Moshe should have had too profound understanding of the goodness of Hashem's actions to utter the words "treated them badly."

When Pharaoh asked Yaakov how old he was, he replied (*Bereishis* 47:9), "The years of my life have been few and bad." According to the Midrash, Hashem immediately said to Yaakov, "I saved you from Eisav and Lavan and I returned Dinah and Yosef to you, and now you are complaining that your

years are few and bad? Your life will be shortened by the number of words in your complaint."

Yaakov never expressed his complaints to Hashem, but apparently deep inside he did not perceive the absolute good of everything Hashem had sent his way. Although his life may have been bitter, he should have realized that it was not bad. The confrontation with Eisav developed the Jewish people's ability to contend with Eisav's descendants in future generations. Yosef's removal to Egypt paved the way for the salvation of the nation. These were difficult, trying and even incomprehensible events, but ultimately, they were not bad. As the Chafetz Chaim points out, strong medicine may be bitter, but if it is effective, it cannot be considered bad.

This is where Moshe erred. In his great love and devotion for the Jewish people, he was distracted by their momentary affliction and lost sight of its ultimate good. For that brief moment when those fateful words slipped out, he failed to see that, in the broader scheme of things, Hashem was treating the Jewish people exceedingly well.

Healthy Separation

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

In this week's parsha, God speaks to Moses and tells him to say to the Jewish people:

> "I am God, and I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; and I will save you from their service; and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. And I will take you to Me for a people, and I will be a God to you..." (Exodus 6:6-7)

This passage uses four separate expressions of redemption. Surely any one of these expressions alone would have sufficed to convey God's promise to redeem the Jewish people! Why are all four necessary?

The commentator Netivot Shalom explains that these four promises are not merely expressions of redemption; rather, they represent four separate redemptions (see also Talmud Yerushalmi, Pesachim 10:1). These four redemptions can be understood as four stages of redemption that were needed to completely liberate the Jews from Egyptian exile.

The Jewish people in Egypt had fallen to the lowest possible spiritual level. The Midrash (Socher Tov on Psalms 114) compares the enslaved Jewish nation to a fetus within the womb of an impure animal, based on the verse, "...to take for Himself a nation from amidst a nation" (Deut. 4:34). The Jewish people were living "inside" the Egyptians. Their identity was completely meshed with the corruption and immorality of Egyptian society.

According to the Netivot Shalom, since the situation was so severe, the first stage of redemption was for the Jews to be *taken out* from the darkness and impurity of their surrounding culture. Nevertheless, they were still slaves to their *inner drive toward negativity* (*yetzer hara*). The second stage, then, was to be *saved* from this servitude. The slave mentality cannot be so easily eradicated, however; even after being saved, the Jewish people were still subjugated to the side of negativity. It was this subjugation from which God *redeemed* the Jews. The final stage of redemption was for God to *take* the Jews as His nation.

PROGRESSIVE IDENTITY

When we look carefully at the progression of these four stages, we see the Jewish people slowly moving away from their Egyptian neighbors and defining their own identity, gradually transforming from Egypt's possession to God's. This process enabled the Jews to grow into themselves and recognize their unique identity as a people.

The ten plagues (seven of which are found in this week's parsha) are a concrete example of this process. As the plagues progress, the Jews' separation from the Egyptians becomes increasingly clear. This distancing from other nations is not a blanket condemnation; rather, it entails a rejection of those secular influences that are destructive to spiritual growth or antithetical to Torah values. This process of separation helps crystallize the Jewish people's unique identity.

The Ibn Ezra (on Exodus 8:28, citing Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi) notes that the plagues progressed from the bottom up. The first two plagues, blood and frogs, involved water, which flows to the lowest places on earth. The next two plagues, lice and wild beasts, took place on the land - one step higher than water. The following plagues, livestock epidemic and boils, were caused by airborne disease - one step higher than land. The plagues of hail and locusts involved clouds (the locusts formed a cloud of their own!), representing the highest reaches of the atmosphere. The plague of darkness took place on a level even beyond that, in the celestial realm. And the death of the firstborn affected people's very souls, coming from beyond the furthest galaxies.

The Midrash (Shmot Raba 9:10) explains that during every plague, the Egyptians were stricken, while the Jews were spared. However, the Jews who completely identified themselves with the Egyptians were not saved (Shmot Raba 14:3). They died during the plague of darkness. Their desire to become like the Egyptians ultimately resulted in their sharing the same fate as their neighbors.

We can learn from the process of the Jews' redemption from Egypt how valuable it is for us to maintain a unique identity and not to align ourselves with value systems that are antithetical to Torah. Even the non-Jewish prophet Bilaam recognized this when he described the Jewish people as "a nation that dwells alone, and is not reckoned among the nations" (Numbers 23:9). This quality of separateness, which is so often misunderstood, is actually the source of our strength as a nation. While other nations rise and fall, we are still here to tell the tale. The degree to which we preserve Jewish identity is the degree to which that identity will preserve us.

May we be blessed to succeed in separating ourselves from any philosophy that is counterproductive to spiritual growth, and through building ourselves gradually, may we merit to soon be redeemed from this dark exile.