

SHABBAT SHALOM FROM CYBERSPACE

VA'ERA

Haftarah: Yehezkel 28:25-29:21

JANUARY 12-13, 2018 26 TEBET 5778

Rosh Hodesh Shebat will be celebrated on Wednesday, January 17.

DEDICATION: Sara Cain – Sara bat Esther 25th of Tebet

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EDITORS NOTES

Only in Israel: Druze Firefighter Risks Life to Rescue Torah Scroll from Burning Synagogue

Last week, Israeli firefighters received a call to rush to a burning building in the northern town of Neharia. When they arrived at the scene, they were relieved to learn that no people were trapped inside the building. But they were also dismayed to learn that the building was a synagogue.

One firefighter in particular was touched: Weam Nevuani, a veteran Druze firefighter, observed the towering flames and thought that every effort ought to be made to rescue the sacred objects inside.

"As I was working," he told Israeli TV, "I saw a Torah scroll about to catch fire. I jumped on it right away and dragged it out of the burning building. As I was rescuing the Torah scroll I felt as if I was holding a soul, as if I was rescuing a soul, as if I was holding a baby."

When asked if he was not afraid to succumb to the fire and the smoke, Nevuani again said he felt drawn to the Torah and obliged to save it at all cost. "The scroll radiated heat that truly touched my heart," he said. "And for a few moments there, I thought of what was written in that scroll, and I realized I did exactly what I was supposed to do."

FROM THE ARCHIVES: Editors Notes
Zechot Avot In the Merit of Our Forefathers

As we completed last week's portion, Moses returns to G-d and is puzzled as to why his visit with Pharaoh did not result in the Children of Israel being able to

leave Egypt and furthermore seemed to effect a terrible consequence in Pharaoh demanding that the slaves supply their own straw in the brick making process. The Israelites are not very happy with Moses. As we begin this week's portion, G-d assures Moses. He tells Moses not to worry. Not only will the Israelites be released from bondage, they will be led to the land promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And then in what seems to be the middle of the conversation, there is a break in the action and we are re-introduced to the families of Reuben and Shimon and finally Levi listing the grandfather and great uncles of Moses and Aaron, then the father, uncles and cousins, nephews and great nephews and finally Moses and Aaron themselves.

Rabbi Abittan once explained that it is crucial to remember that we are all human beings. None of us are gods or angels. All of us have human flaws which we must overcome. And because we are all in essence the same, any of us can achieve what a Moses or an Abraham or a David achieves. Perhaps as Rav Hirsch suggests, it's at the point where miracles begin when we must be reminded that Moses and Aaron are men. Rabbi Abittan went on to explain that we must never forget that much of whom we are lies in zechut avot, the merit of our forefathers. Whether we call it spiritual nature and spiritual genes or a spiritual nurture, we owe so much to those who came before us.

Today is the Yahrzeit of my great uncle Dave Bibi. Uncle Dave and I share the exact same name. We are both David Joseph Bibi. Twenty six year after he passed away people meeting me for the first time often ask if he was my grandfather. And I explain that my grandfather was Reuben, but I am named David after my maternal grandfather, David Gindi. When I was a child, I shared a special bond with Uncle Dave. He would often test me in my knowledge of Torah and would reward me generously. When I was older, he would talk to me about human nature, about business and about responsibility. During my twenties I spent a great deal of my time in Europe and no matter when I went, Uncle Dave had been there before and many doors were opened in his honor. Still today, people remember his as a great man.

My father often spoke of his Uncle. He wrote about him as well. Some of the stories are published, others recorded and many just in his notes.

Uncle Dave was separated from his father and his older brother for the first nine years of his life. They were divided by two continents, an ocean and a world at war. My great-grandfather Joseph, who was living with my grandfather in San Francisco, must have been tormented that he could get neither word nor money to his two young sons, his wife and his daughter half way around the world. We know that David's older sister Shefika with two young children and a husband drafted into the Turkish army went out to support the family by selling eggs in the market. As she was fluent in several languages, she also worked with the embassies. Everyone loved her, but one day at the end of the war, she was murdered. No one is sure if it was an egg merchant who felt threatened or because of her work with the embassies. A very tough life became suddenly much tougher for young David.

When the family was finally reunited in New York in 1920, young David was able to get to know his father. But even that was short lived as Joseph passed away in 1927. And then two years later the depression hit, but nothing seemed to get Dave Bibi down. He was an eternal optimist. He was brilliant, always figuring out the solution to any problem and never giving up. He was a people person who cared deeply for all those around him.

My dad wrote that at the tender age of 21, in 1932, in the midst of the depression, Dave Bibi volunteered to raise money to renovate the Ahi Ezer Synagogue. The Synagogue began as a house on 64th Street and 21st Avenue purchased in the early 20s. Hacham Murad Maslaton was grateful at the attempt and when Dave succeeded, the Rabbi was ecstatic. By 1936, the main room of the synagogue was overcrowded and had to be extended. This meant more fundraising, a duty that by then Dave Bibi inherited. In 1939, Dave, at the tender age of 29 became the third president of Ahi Ezer succeeding Mr. Mousa Attieh. To be chosen for such a role at such a young age indicated the great esteem that his congregation had for him.

One of my favorite stories was hearing how the Bibi family got into the lighting business. The family was renowned around the world for many generations as master artisans who were virtual magicians with silver and other metals. In the 30's, Uncle Dave organized Bibi and Company with his older brother Reuben, blessed with a brilliant mind and magical

hands as the head of production. His nephew Nouri ran the office, while Dave did the buying and selling.

In the late 30s Dave met with an antique dealer who had often used the family factory to refurbish pieces. The man had a candelabra. What was unusual was that it was electrified with crystal arms and glass prisms hanging down. The man explained that he used to buy these from Czechoslovakia, but that wasn't an option any more. The man left the piece with Dave who called in his brother to study it. For Reuben, this was an intriguing challenge. For the next few days he walked around the city studying glassware. An ashtray here, some salt and pepper shakers, a cut glass dessert plate all mounted on a fabricated metal frame looked great. Next he had to arrange for the electrical components. He knew a lamp dealer and asked if he had any items he was discarding. When shown an entire room in a warehouse, Reuben went through it and purchased it. One man's junk became the other's treasure. Reuben tinkered with the wires, the sockets, the switches, until he finally had a beautiful copy of the candelabra that the antique dealer brought to Uncle Dave.

"This is beautiful," the dealer, "can you make some more?"

Slowly, Bibi and Co. began specializing in candelabras that could be outfitted either for candles or electricity. Clients continued to show the brothers different styles and models and challenged them to interpret and produce their own versions. And Dave Bibi, master salesman as he was took these samples up and down the east coast.

What was so special about Dave was that as much time as he devoted to business, he devoted no less time and no less effort to charitable works almost dividing his day between the two. And with all his efforts, one might think he absolved himself from giving. At the end of each month, he sat with his partners and reviewed the numbers and moved whatever he could into the charity fund. If they could only do ten percent, then it would be ten percent, but the goal was to donate as much as possible. And there was no community charity or project where he wasn't involved.

My Uncle Dave showed us one can be the president of the synagogue and the owner of a successful business, and still he should always run to greet a stranger, find him a seat, make him welcome, and invite him to your house. In business, he showed us that one could be traveling the world, with no other Jew around for miles, but wherever he was he knew

he was the Jew who had to set the example, who had to stop and pray and who had to always do the right thing. And I can never figure out how he did it, but whoever needed a job was given one at Bibi.

As I noted above, Rabbi Abittan explained that we must never forget that much of whom we are, lies in zechut avot, the merit of our forefathers. Whether we call it spiritual nature and spiritual genes or a spiritual nurture, we owe so much to those who came before us. I am sure that one could easily write a book on Dave Bibi's life and on the good that he did. I am proud and honored to be able to share his name.

Shabbat Shalom,

David Bib

Summary of the Perasha Nathan I Dweck

I heard a nice idea that there is an extra benefit of paying attention closely to the parshiot of this week and next. These parshiot are the parshiot relevant to Pesach and the 10 macot. And many times when Pesach comes we are busy with all the mitsvot of Pesach that unfortunately we don't have time to read over the parshiot in full. So now is the time! Now we have the time to look at the parshiot in full and to read every word. And these are the parshiot that build emunah. These are the parshiot where we see the extent of Hashem's hashgacha peratit. How Hashem turned every ounce of water to turn to blood; every canal, every pond and other gathering of water turned to blood. Even the water in their wooden and stone vessels turned to blood. How Hashem caused the frogs, against their nature, to jump even into the ovens of the Mistrim. How Hashem caused the makot to start and stop exactly when he said so. How Hashem warned and said in fine detail exactly what would happen before it happened. How Hashem showed his dominance over the animals causing them to come and go when he said. How Hashem showed his control over nature, causing the sun not to shine for days, causing water and fire to mix harmoniously, causing the wind to come and go as he pleased in order to bring and remove the Locusts. How Hashem separated ahm Israel from the goyim causing all their animals to die in barad while not a single Jewish animal died. How Hashem caused even the greatest non-believer, Paroah, to say "Hashem is the sadik and me and my people are the resha'im". These are the parshiot where bitachon is built! These are the parshiot to read closely and pay attention to! These are the parshiot which caused even the Egyptians to acknowledge that Hashem is the king!

Va'era - Plagues 1-7

1- Hashem tells Moshe to go back and tell Benei Israel Hashem will save them and take them as a nation. They don't listen. Hashem tells Moshe to go to Paroah.

2- The parasha formally introduces Moshe and Aharon giving their lineage

3- Hashem tells Moshe what to expect. He will harden Paroah's heart and at first he will not listen. Hashem will then bring wonders and Mitsrayim will see Hashem's strength.

4- Moshe and Aharon go to Paroah. They bring a sign turning a stick into a snake but he does not listen. They return again bringing the macot of dam and then sefarde'ah.

5- Macat Sefardeah ends, Macat Kinim, The warnings for macat Arov

6- Macot Arov, Dever, and Shechin

7- Macat Barad

FROM THE RABBIS OF THE JERSEY SHORE

"The river shall swarm with frogs...and into your ovens." (Shemot 7:28)

When Hashem brought upon Egypt a plague of frogs, some of these creatures readily crept into the hot ovens of the Egyptians. While all the frogs who had entered far safer areas, such as bedrooms and courtyards, died at the conclusion of the plague, the "self-sacrificing" ones miraculously stayed alive.

Centuries later, Nebuchadnessar, the evil king of Babelonia, erected a colossal golden image in the Plain of Dura and ordered all present to prostrate themselves before it, or else be thrown into a fiery furnace. Chananya, Mishael, and Azaryah refused, and were cast into a furnace. What made them do it? The Gemara (Pesachim 53b) tells us that they made a kal vahomer from the frogs in Egypt. They reasoned that if a frog, who is not obligated to give up his life for Kidush Hashem, leaped into a burning oven, they, who were obligated, should certainly do so. Then a series of miracles occurred and they were saved.

The frogs represent the concept of Lifnim Mishurat Hadin, going beyond the letter of the law. There is an even higher level called Lifnim Lifnim Mishurat Hadin, where a person conducts himself in a manner that goes even further. The impact in the Heavenly realms of this latter level of conduct is astoundingly powerful.

The following story about Rav Chaim Brim zt"l illustrates this level. Rav Chaim

Brim's daughter resided in Yerushalayim, living in a humble apartment. At one point, due to the growth of her family, they needed to make an extension, to build a room where her porch was located. After getting the permits and the permission from her

neighbors, she began construction. It was at that point that she received a phone call from one of her neighbors, who had changed her mind. She no longer agreed because it would block the light to her apartment. The only problem was that she already sank \$2000 into the project. She called her father. "Give in to her," said Rav Chaim. "If she doesn't want it, don't do it. Act Lifnim Mishurat Hadin, the merit of which is worth a lot more than \$2000."

A few minutes after this conversation, he called her back. "I would like you to call your neighbor and tell her that you changed your mind about the extension."

"Changed my mind?"

"Yes," said Rav Chaim. "I realize that your neighbor, despite her objection to the project, is going to feel bad that she caused you to lose money. Call her back and tell her that the reason you're not going ahead with the extension is because you changed your mind. This way she won't have feelings of guilt. This is Lifnim Lifnim Mishurat Hadin. The merit is beyond comprehension. So go ahead, call your neighbor and let her know you changed your mind." Rabbi Reuven Semah

In this week's parashah, we learn about the first seven of the Ten Plagues that Hashem brought on the Egyptians. Through the plagues, Hashem demonstrated that He runs the world and there is no other power besides Him.

The fourth plague, Arov, is referred to in English as "wild animals." However, the Hebrew word Arov actually means a mixture or an assortment, referring to the fact that all different species of animals from all four corners of the world converged upon Egypt. One may ask: in all the other plagues, the name of the plague describes the essence of the plague (blood, frogs, etc.). Why is this plague called "mixture"? Why is that an important feature of the plague?

If there would have been a rampage of wild animals, but not from all parts of the world, one could have made a claim that this was just a coincidence. Sometimes an animal may leave its natural habitat and enter a city to cause destruction. But when animals that cannot survive in cold climates come together with animals that cannot survive in warm climates, one has to admit that this is not a natural occurrence. It is clearly orchestrated by Hashem. In fact, some explain that each animal brought with it the climate that it needs to survive. So when the polar bear came, it would get very cold and snowy, and then a few minutes later, a camel would come and it would suddenly become hot like a desert. These sudden changes in climate further demonstrated beyond any doubt that Hashem was

controlling everything. Therefore the "mixture" of animals was in fact a key component of the plague.

We may not see such extreme events very often, but if we pay attention, we can clearly see Hashem's guiding Hand in our lives constantly. Let's open our eyes and enjoy the miracles that Hashem is doing for us every single day.
Rabbi Shmuel Choueka

Small Changes

It seems our days pass too quickly to allow for careful consideration of our actions. We live our lives from moment to moment, and don't have time to make changes.

The quality of our lives can be improved by making a series of little changes to create a better environment for ourselves.

For example, one of the great inventions of all time is the cup holder, which enables drivers or passengers to put down a drink while traveling, rather than fumble with the container until they finish downing the beverage. It's not a headline-grabbing invention, but it really does make life more pleasant.

Similarly, there are many simple ways we can rearrange our lives to improve our quality of life. At home, at work, or in our cars, little changes can make a big difference. Midrash Rabbah on Shir Hashirim quotes the phrase, kevutsotav taltalim (5:11). The Midrash explains that taltalim refers to mounds, and kevutsotav refers to cutting them apart.

If one has to remove a huge mound of earth, one does so by "cutting it apart" and removing a small amount at a time.

A friend of mine was consistently five minutes behind schedule for everything. One morning he was awakened early by some noises outside his window. He got up, got dressed, had a quick hit of caffeine, and went to the synagogue to pray. It was the first time he ever found convenient parking nearby and actually had to wait for the services to begin. It was also the first time he was able to concentrate on the fact that he was talking to Hashem about the priorities of his life and asking Hashem to improve his situation. He decided to change his wake-up time by five minutes from then on.

When you find yourself rushing to do something that you do daily, stop and ask yourself, "Is there a better way?" Constantly looking for the better way – even by making a small change – can lead to permanent improvements in your quality of life. (One Minute With Yourself – Rabbi Raymond Beyda)

RABBI ELI MANSOUR
Maintaining Idealism

In Parashat Vaera the Torah traces the lineage of Moshe and Aharon, listing the sons and descendants of Levi through Moshe and Aharon. The Torah concludes this section by saying, "This is Aharon and Moshe to whom G-d said, 'Bring Beneh Yisrael from the land of Egypt... They are the ones who spoke to Pharaoh king of Egypt... This is Moshe and Aharon'" (Shemot 6:26-27).

The obvious question arises, why did the Torah have to emphasize – twice – that "this is Aharon and Moshe"? Moshe and Aharon have already been introduced, and we have been reading about them in the stories told thus far in the Book of Shemot. What is the Torah's intent in stressing that "this is Aharon and Moshe" and "this is Moshe and Aharon"?

Rav Mordechai Gifter (1915-2001) explained that the Torah here refers to Moshe and Aharon's consistent mindset and motives throughout the entire process of the Exodus. Too often, people who involve themselves in noble and important causes gradually lose their idealism as time passes and complex issues arise. As committees are formed and people must sit and work together to achieve the desired results, the egos often take over, and eventually the committee members act to promote themselves rather than the idealistic cause for which they initially joined the project. The initial rush of idealism subsides and gives way to personal agendas and selfish goals. And in the end, what had begun as a noble, altruistic endeavor degenerates into a battle of egos and clash of personal interests.

The Torah therefore emphasizes that "this is Aharon and Moshe" who first went to Pharaoh, and "this is Moshe and Aharon" even later in the process. All throughout, their motives and intentions remained consistent. Their desire was to lead Beneh Yisrael to redemption, and was not tainted by the quest for grandeur and self-promotion. Their involvement in this undertaking began idealistic, remained idealistic, and ended idealistic.

The Torah thus teaches us to keep a proper perspective throughout the noble projects in which we involve ourselves, not to lose sight of the higher purpose for which we committed ourselves to those causes in the first place. The spirit of idealism and "Le'Shem Shamayim" ("for the sake of Heaven") that drives us to take on important projects should continue fueling us throughout the long, and often difficult, process. It must always be about our higher ideals, and never about just ourselves.

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Rabbi Wein
IT IS COLD OUTSIDE

The well-known axiom about the weather is that everyone talks about it but there is no one that can do anything about it. So this is an opinion article about the weather without any pretense by the writer to be able to do anything about it. We here in Jerusalem have experienced a number of quite cold days, heavy rains and high winds recently. Of course it is winter here and these things are not especially exceptional for this time of year. Nevertheless, though we pray for rain, when it comes we hope it comes in moderation and with warm temperatures.

When it comes with cold temperatures – and the word cold is relative – with heavy torrential downpours, we certainly take notice and hope that the discomfort occasioned by such weather will soon pass. Here in Jerusalem such weather really does not last long though its effects on the citizens and the streets can linger for a while.

Rarely if ever do we in Jerusalem suffer bitter cold and/or extended periods of below freezing temperatures. We are blessed with a temperate climate, warm summers and fairly moderate winters. We are told that this is a healthy climate, one not given to extremes, one that allows for relative comfort and outside activities all year round.

Jerusalem is especially blessed with very little relative humidity and even on very warm days the outside atmosphere is quite bearable. The same cannot be said for Tel Aviv and the coastline areas of Israel. So, it is one of the special gifts that the Lord has bestowed upon the Holy City.

This fairly benign observation about the weather here in Jerusalem certainly cannot be said about the weather that is currently enveloping most of the United States of America. There, the weather experts tell us, there is an inverted Arctic vortex – whatever in the world that means – that is causing severe cold all over the country and apparently it is staying for some time. Recently the President of the United States sarcastically remarked that he wished that Europe would send him some of their global warming to help warm up the United States.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks

I think that this Siberian weather mass that has settled over the United States may be another example of the extent of collusion that exists between the White House and the Kremlin. Perhaps the special counsel appointed by the Congress will eventually investigate this as well. But then again, as I often do, I digress.

Students of human nature have long maintained that weather and climate have a definite effect on mood and creative efforts of human beings. No one wants to be cold and wet for long periods of time. Nevertheless the human being is the most adaptable creature and lives in every climate, no the matter how hot, cold, wet or dry it may be. It is one of the miracles of human life that humans are so adaptable to the environment that they live in, no matter how harsh and unwelcoming.

Here in Israel we are not nearly as dependent on rainfall for our water supply as we were even a few decades ago. Israel is one of the leading developers of desalinization technology and approximately 80% of Israel's water supply comes from the salinization plants along the Mediterranean coastline. Another 15% comes from aquifers and underground springs, as well as some recycled water. which is used mainly for agriculture. The remaining 5% of the water supply here in Israel comes from rainfall and the Kinneret.

Nevertheless, abundant rainfall is necessary to replenish both the lake and the underground sources of water. The Middle East is basically a dry climate with a good portion of the year recording no rainfall whatsoever. Therefore when the rainy season does arrive, we hope that it will be a time of plentiful rain even though this sometimes serves as a discomfort to those who inhabit this part of the world.

We have invoked special prayers for a more abundant rainfall this year and even though when it rains it really rains, this year can be judged as a rather dry one. Water is a precious commodity everywhere in the world but especially here in our area. The major struggle between Syria and Israel until the Six-Day War concerned itself with water and who would control the headwaters of the Jordan River.

Water is a negotiating chip on peace initiatives here in the Middle East. Israel supplies Jordan with a great deal of water on an annual basis as part of its obligations under the peace treaty between the two countries. So water counts in many ways here in our world.

In parshat Va'era we read for the first time, not of Pharaoh hardening his heart but of God doing so: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart," said God to Moses, "and multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" (Ex. 7:3). And so indeed we find in the sixth plague, boils (Ex. 9:12), the eighth, locusts (Ex. 10:1, 20), and the tenth, the firstborn (Ex. 11:10). In each case the hardening is attributed to God.

Hence the problem that troubled the sages and later commentators: if God was the cause and Pharaoh merely His passive vehicle, what was his sin? He had no choice, therefore no responsibility, therefore no culpability. The commentators give a broad range of answers. One: Pharaoh's loss of freewill during the last five plagues was a punishment for his obstinacy in the first five, where he acted freely.[1] Two: the relevant verb, ch-z-k, does not mean "to harden" but "to strengthen." God was not taking away Pharaoh's freewill but, to the contrary, preserving it in the face of the overwhelming disasters that were hitting Egypt.[2] Three: God is a partner in all human action, but we only usually attribute an act to God if it seems inexplicable in ordinary human terms. Pharaoh acted freely throughout, but it was only during the last five plagues that his behaviour was so strange that it was attributed to God.[3]

Note how reluctant the commentators were to take the text at face value – rightly so because freewill is one of the fundamental beliefs of Judaism. Maimonides explains why: If we had no free will there would be, he says, no point to the commands and prohibitions, since we would behave as we were predestined to, regardless of what the law is. Nor would there be any justice in reward or punishment since neither the righteous nor the wrongdoer is free to be other than what they are.[4]

So the problem is an ancient one.[5] But it has become much more salient in modern times because of the sheer accumulation of challenges to the belief in human freedom. Marx said history is formed by the play of economic forces. Freud argued that we are what we are because of unconscious drives. Neo-Darwinians say that however we rationalise our behaviour, we do what we do because people who behaved this way in the past survived to hand on their genes to future generations. Most recently, neuroscientists have shown, using fMRI scans, that in some cases our brain registers a decision up to seven seconds before we are consciously aware of it.[6]

All of this is interesting and important, but contemporary secularists usually fail to see what the ancient sages knew: that if we genuinely lack freewill, our entire sense of what it is to be human will crumble into dust. There is a glaring contradiction at the heart of our culture. On the one hand, secularists believe that nothing should constrain our freedom to choose to do whatever we want to do, or be whatever we want to be, so long as we do not harm others. Their supreme value is autonomous choice. On the other hand, secularists tell us that human freedom does not exist. Why then should we invoke freedom-to-choose as a value if it is, according to science, an illusion?

If hard determinism is true, there is no reason to honour liberty or create a free society. To the contrary: we should embrace Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*, where children are conceived and hatched in laboratories, and adults programmed to stay happy by a regime of drugs and pleasure. We should implement the scenario of Anthony Burgess's *The Clockwork Orange*, in which criminals are reformed by brain surgery or conditioning. If freedom does not exist, why be bothered by the addictive nature of computer games and social media? Why prefer genuine reality to virtual reality? It was Nietzsche who rightly observed that the greater our scientific achievements, the lower our view of the human person. No longer the image of God, we have become mere incarnated algorithms.

The truth is that the more we understand about the human brain, the better able we are to describe what free action really is. At present, scientists distinguish between the amygdala, the most primitive part of the brain, conditioned to sensitise us to potential danger; the limbic system, sometimes called the "social brain," which is responsible for much of our emotional life; and the prefrontal cortex, which is analytical and capable of dispassionately weighing the consequences of alternative choices.[7] The tensions between these three form the arena within which personal freedom is won or lost.

Patterns of behaviour are shaped by neural pathways connecting different parts of the brain, but not all of them are good for us. So, for instance, we might turn to drugs or binge eating or thrill-seeking to distract us from some of the unhappy chemicals – fears and anxieties, for instance – that are also part of the architecture of the brain. The more often we do so, the more myelin gets wrapped around the pathway, and the more rapid and instinctive the behaviour. So the more often we behave in certain ways, the harder it is to break the habit and create a new and different pathway. To do so requires the acquisition of new

habits, acted on consistently for an extended period of time. Current scientific thinking suggests that a minimum of 66 days is needed to form a new habit.[8]

So we now have a scientific way of explaining the hardening taking place in Pharaoh's heart. Having established a pattern of response to the first five plagues, he would find it progressively more difficult at every level – neuro-scientifically, psychologically and politically – to change. The same is true of every bad habit and political decision. Almost all our structures, mental and social, tend to reinforce previous patterns of behaviour. So our freedom diminishes every time we fail to exercise it.

If so, then today's parsha and contemporary science tell the same story: that freedom is not a given, nor is it an absolute. We have to work for it. We acquire it slowly in stages, and we can lose it, as Pharaoh lost his, and as drug addicts, workaholics, and people addicted to computer games lose theirs. In one of the most famous opening lines in all literature, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote, at the beginning of *The Social Contract*, that "Man is born free and everywhere he is in chains." In fact, the opposite is true. Our early character is determined partly by DNA – the genetic heritage of our parents and theirs – partly by our home and upbringing, partly by our friends[9], and partly by the surrounding culture. We are not born free. We have to work hard to achieve freedom.

That takes rituals, whose repeated performance creates new neural pathways and new rapid-response behaviour. It requires a certain calibrated distance from the surrounding culture, if we are not to be swept away by social fads and fashions that seem liberating now but destructive in retrospect. It needs a mental mindset that pauses before any significant action and asks, "Should I do this? May I do this? What rules of conduct should I bring to bear?" It involves an internalised narrative of identity, so that we can ask of any course of action, "Is this who I am and what I stand for?"

It is no accident that the elements listed in the previous paragraph are all prominent features of Judaism, which turns out to be an ongoing seminar in willpower and impulse control. Now that we are beginning to understand the plasticity of the brain, we know at least a little of the neuroscience that lies behind the ability to overcome bad habits and addictions. Keeping Shabbat, for example, has the power to liberate us and our children from smartphone addiction and all that goes with it. The religion whose first festival, Pesach, celebrates collective freedom, gives us, in its rituals, the skills

we need for personal freedom.

Freedom is less a gift than an achievement. Even a Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the ancient world, could lose it. Even a nation of slaves could, with the help of God, acquire it. Never take freedom for granted. It needs a hundred small acts of self-control daily, which is what halakhah, Jewish law, is all about.

Freedom is a muscle that needs to be exercised: use it or lose it. That is a life-transforming idea.

Rav Kook on the Perasha

Why do we find different names for God in the Torah?

Different names correspond to the different ways in which God reveals Himself in the world. The Tetragrammaton, the special name composed of the four letters Yud-Hey-Vav-Hey, corresponds to a level of Divine revelation that was concealed before Moses' time.

"I revealed Myself to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai [God Almighty]. But I was not known to them through My name Y-H-V-H. (Ex. 6:3)

What is the significance of these two names of God? Why did only Moses' generation merit knowledge of the Tetragrammaton?

In the same prophetic communication to Moses, God contrasted the Patriarchs' ties to the Land of Israel with that of their descendants. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were only travelers and foreigners in the Land:

"I made My covenant with them, giving them the Land of Canaan, the land of their wanderings, where they lived as foreigners." (Ex. 6:4)

Their descendants, on the other hand, were destined to settle permanently in the Land: "I will give it to you as an eternal inheritance" (Ex. 6:8).

Is there some connection between the different names for God and residence in Eretz Yisrael?

A Higher Level of Providence

Dwelling in the Land of Israel means living with a greater degree of Divine providence. It is "a land constantly under the scrutiny of the Eternal, your God; the eyes of the Eternal your God are on it at all times" (Deut. 11:12). God gave Eretz Yisrael to the

Jewish people as an eternal inheritance, so that they will always benefit from this unparalleled level of Divine providence. God's providence will never leave the people of Israel; their history transcends the laws of nature.

This level of Divine guidance was only possible after they became a nation. Individuals, even the most righteous, may waver and stumble. Therefore, the Patriarchs could only be sojourners in Eretz Yisrael. They could only merit the Land's preternatural providence in a temporary, sporadic fashion.

The name Shaddai comes from the word shiddud, meaning 'to intervene.' This name for God implies occasional Divine intervention in the natural realm. This was the degree of providence that the Avot experienced. They lived in a world of natural forces - with occasional miracles. They were but travelers in the Land of Israel. God was thus revealed to them as El Shaddai.

With the formation of Israel as a nation, however, the special providence of the Land of Israel became the Jewish people's permanent inheritance. The generation of Moses was granted a higher revelation of God's providence, as reflected in the name Y-H-V-H. This Divine name comes from the word lehavot, 'to cause to exist.' Their world was no longer a universe ruled by the forces of nature. They merited a constant, direct connection to the One Who continually creates and sustains all existence.

(Sapphire from the Land of Israel. Adapted from Midbar Shur, pp. 293-297.)