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HEARTS AND MINDS OVER MATTER

by Rabbi Chaim Poupko

Hezekiah Niles, an early 19th century American editor and publisher, received a letter in April of 1818 from his friend John Adams. In it, Adams makes an insightful observation which can be seen in this week's Parashah. He writes:

"But what do we mean by the American Revolution? Do we mean the American War? The Revolution was effected before the war commenced. The Revolution was in **the minds and hearts of the people**; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations."

In other words, Adams claims that the essential ingredients to the American Revolution were not the actual battles. Rather, to this Founding Father of the United States of America, the essential ingredient was the collection of values and beliefs held by the people. No battle could be won without these values and beliefs and the conviction to uphold them.

The Kotzker Rebbe identifies this same idea as a prerequisite for divine redemption. Rav Menachem Mendel of Kotzk, who flourished around the same time as Adams but in another part of the world, argues that the Jewish peoples' hearts and minds would have to be primed for Hashem in order for Hashem to carry out what He promised in his covenants with the Avot. The Jewish People would need to see themselves differently for the process to succeed. Hashem declares, "VeHotzeiti Etchem MiTachat Sivlot Mitzrayim," "And I will take you out from underneath the burdens of Egypt" (Shemot 6:6). The Kotzker sees in this Pasuk that Hashem is describing not the physical act of being taken out of ancient Egypt but the critical first step in redemption. For Ge'ulah to occur, the people must first reject their exile. They must no longer align themselves, mentally and spiritually, with the host culture. They must aspire to rid themselves of the impurity of Egyptian paganism and yearn for lives of values embodied in their traditions. And so Moshe, in relating these expressions of Ge'ulah, anticipates that Hashem will help the Jewish people remove from their hearts and minds any tolerance for the idolatry and behaviors of ancient Egyptian society. The Kotzker sees this in the Torah's curious usage of the uncommon term for servitude, "Sivlot," which most simply means "burdens." The Kotzker Rebbe suggests that this word also connotes the concept of "tolerance," as in the

similarly spelled word "Savlanut." In other words, Hashem will enable the Jewish people to overcome their "tolerance" of ancient Egyptian culture. Out of this development, a fundamental change in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people will occur. And once they saw themselves as no longer subservient to an alien culture, they were ready to embark upon the other steps of divine redemption.

Sometimes when a project or other endeavor does not originally succeed, we say that our "heart wasn't in it." There are many instances when that sense of drive simply is not present, and it is difficult to accomplish something without the proper motivation. But when the aspirations are great, when the will for something is strong, then we see what the Kotzker Rebbe and, LeHavdil, John Adams understood. When the heart and mind believe in something and adhere to our best values, the degree of success will most likely be raised. Not too many years after Adams and the Kotzker, this insight provided the spark for a modern revolution when Theodore Herzl wrote, "if you will it, it is no dream."

WHERE IS PAR'OH'S FREE WILL?

by Shmuel Bak ('18)

Since the time that Adam and Chavah ate from the Eitz HaDa'at (BeReishit 3:6), mankind has known the difference between good and bad (3:22). From the early Parashiyot in Sefer BeReishet, it is quite clear that mankind has the right of free will. However, we as Jews believe that while we do have free will, Hashem knows what will ultimately happen. In Parashat VaEira, Hashem not only hardens Par'oh's heart, but He also tells Moshe in advance of His planned actions (Shemot 7:3). Why and how did Hashem take away Par'oh's free will?

There are several theories presented by Meforashim which address this confusing question. According to Shadal (7:3 s.v. VaAni Aksheh Et Leiv Par'oh), when the Torah mentions that Hashem hardened Par'oh's heart, it does not mean that Hashem took away Par'oh's free will. Rather, mentioning that Hashem hardened Par'oh's heart connects Par'oh's free will to the Divine source of his free choice, Hashem. Since ultimately all acts are accredited to Hashem, the Pesukim are merely informing us that Par'oh's hardened heart can be accredited to Hashem.

Based on Shadal's approach, the following question arises: how can one's decisions ever be attributed to oneself? Shadal answers that only "Ma'asim Zarim," "strange actions which cannot be explained," like Par'oh's blatant stubbornness while being faced with the miraculous plagues, can be ascribed to Hashem.

Abarbanel (ad loc. s.v. VaAni Aksheh Et Leiv Par'oh) offers two more approaches to our question. Throughout the Torah, we see that negative actions have negative consequences. Someone who steals, murders, or transgresses any commandment,

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specifically against his fellow human being, must be atoned for his action in this world before being atoned in the world to come. Par'oh and the Egyptians were guilty of performing horrendous crimes against the Jews for which they had to first be physically punished in this world. By hardening Par'oh's heart, Hashem actually helped Par'oh and the Egyptians; by causing Par'oh's stubbornness and the subsequent plagues, Hashem enabled the Egyptians to be atoned in this world. The second opinion of Abarbanel is that the hardening of Par'oh's heart was caused by the methodology of the plagues. If there were just one continuous plague, certainly Par'oh would have eventually given into it. To show His greatness, however, Hashem ensured that following each plague, Par'oh would try to rationalize what happened by saying that the plague was merely a natural phenomenon, and if it were caused by a divine source, then the plague would not have ended until the Jews were actually freed. Thus, the hardening of Par'oh's heart was an inevitable outgrowth of the way Hashem designed the plagues.

Seforno (ad loc. s.v. VaAni Akshah) argues that Hashem wanted Par'oh to repent, but only for the right reasons. Had Hashem not hardened Par'oh's heart, Par'oh certainly would have let the Jews out, but not because of a sincere desire to repent and accept Hashem as God. Rather, Par'oh would have released the Jews due to the tremendous pain and suffering afflicted by the plagues. Therefore, Hashem hardened Par'oh's heart so that he would have the capability to endure the plagues which would cause him to not release the Jews out of fear of the plagues but out of repentance. While Hashem wanted Par'oh and the Egyptians to repent, He would not accept repentance which was due to duress. By hardening Par'oh's heart, Hashem gave Par'oh an opportunity to fully redeem himself without having to deal with the mental and physical duress which was caused by the plagues.

We see from these Meforashim that Hashem wants us to act in His ways, and He helps us by leading us down the right path. Just as Hashem wanted Par'oh to repent, so too does He want all of mankind to lead righteous and productive lives.

THE POWER OF WORDS

by Yonatan Sturm ('18)

At the beginning Parashat VaEira, Hashem appears to Moshe Rabbeinu for a second time and instructs him to lead his people out of their servitude in Mitzrayim. Moshe immediately becomes defensive and tries to find an excuse to get out of the job. Moshe explains that "Hein Bnei Yisrael Lo Shame'u Eilai, VeEich Yishma'eini Phar'oh," "Behold, the Children of Israel have not listened to me, so how will Par'oh listen to me" (Shemot 6:12). Moshe also mentions to Hashem that he has a speech impediment that prevents him from serving as a great leader. Moshe's objections to Hashem's instructions make him appear as an extremely hesitant and unconfident person. Only after six long days of debates and a compromise that Aharon will be his

spokesman does Moshe finally agree to accept the role as Bnei Yisrael's leader.

A comparison between Moshe's actions in this week's Parashah to some of his earlier actions raises a glaring question. In Parashat Shemot, we read that Moshe saw an Egyptian man striking a fellow Jewish man, and he responded by striking down the Egyptian man, killing him on the spot (2:11-12). From this episode, it appears that Moshe is an unhesitant, confident, and decisive person. He puts the concerns of his brethren before his own and genuinely feels bad about the tremendous pain that they are experiencing. Moshe does not ask anyone else to assist him in the matter or shy away from the situation. He stands up for what he believes is right and puts an abrupt end to the injustice being served to the Jewish man. Moshe knew of the repercussions that he would have to face, but that did not stop him from doing what was right. Later on, when Moshe arrives in Midyan, he sees that the local shepherds are not allowing Yitro's daughters to draw water from the well. He rushes to their aid and drives the shepherds away (2:17). In both instances, Moshe is unafraid to stand up for what he believes is just.

From these two instances, Moshe appears to be a perfect candidate for Bnei Yisrael's leader. One would have expected him to seize the opportunity to save the Jews from Par'oh's cruelty immediately after being asked to do so by Hashem. Yet, Moshe attempts to evade this seemingly amazing opportunity. Before Moshe's two heroic actions, nobody instructed him to act as he did, yet he took action on his own. Therefore, why is Moshe so reluctant to be the leader of Bnei Yisrael, even upon Hashem's request? Why does Moshe not act confidently like he did when killing the Egyptian and saving Yitro's daughters?

At first glance, it seems that Moshe uses his speech impediment as an excuse to not go to Par'oh. However, a closer look at the text reveals that Moshe is very concerned that he is an unqualified public speaker. His previous acts of heroism were dependent on his actions. On the contrary, Moshe is now asked to be the public speaker and advocate for Bnei Yisrael. Although Moshe understands that becoming the nation's leader is the right thing to do, he does not believe that he will be able to inspire the people through his mediocre speaking abilities. He therefore tells Hashem that he is not the right man for the job, as this job requires tremendous verbal skills.

When Moshe finally agrees to become the nation's leader, Hashem teaches Moshe many physical signs which will convince Bnei Yisrael that he is the proper leader. Moshe certainly prefers physical acts of greatness to verbal persuasion. The climax of Moshe's tenure as leader of Bnei Yisrael comes during the splitting of the Yam Suf, quite possibly the greatest show of physical force the world has ever known.

Moshe Rabbeinu's downfall comes as a result of his inability to transition from a physical leader to a verbal leader. After Miryam's death, the Jews run out of water. Following abundant complaints by the people, Hashem commands Moshe to take his staff and speak to a rock so that it will give forth water; however, Moshe strikes the rock (BeMidbar 20:1-11). He reverts back to the form of leadership with which he is most comfortable and blatantly disregards Hashem's instructions. As a result, Moshe is punished by being stripped of permission to enter the land of Israel (20:12).

We learn from Moshe's leadership that while our actions are important, our words can have a much larger effect on the world. We should always strive to use our words to improve the world.

RECONCILING TORAH AND SCIENCE – AN INTRODUCTION – PART TWO

by Rabbi Chaim Jachter

Introduction

In last week's issue, we introduced the different methodologies for reconciling Torah and science. Specifically, we outlined Rav Moshe Meiselman's approach that Torah can never be challenged by scientific theories. In this issue, we will discuss the theories of Rav Natan Slifkin, Dr. Gerald Schroeder, and Dr. Nathan Aviezer.

Rav Natan Slifkin – Approach Number Two

Rav Natan Slifkin's approach to resolving contradictions between Torah and science has been summarized¹ as follows:

“According to Rabbi Slifkin's approach to the reconciliation of Genesis and modern scientific theory, traditional Judaism mandates neither a literalistic approach to Biblical cosmology, nor a belief that Chazal are always correct about scientific matters. Views similar to these were accepted by some as within the realm of Orthodox Judaism.”

Rav Slifkin summarizes his views as follows:

“Genesis is best understood not as a scientific account but rather as a theological cosmology. As such, it presents a powerful worldview that has accomplished amazing objectives with mankind” (*The Challenge of Creation* pg. 344).

A primary source for Rav Slifkin's approach is Rambam in his *Moreh Nevuchim*, where he boldly asserts that had Aristotle proven that the world is eternal, he would have interpreted the Torah allegorically, since it is impossible for the Torah to contradict reality (2:25). Rather, our literal interpretation of the Torah must be corrected if it does not correspond with demonstrable fact². Rambam emphatically insists that Torah passages which suggest that God is corporeal must be interpreted allegorically, since the corporeality of God contradicts fundamental logic (an infinite God cannot be restricted to a body).

Rav Slifkin's second major source for his approach is a letter written by the great Rav Avraham Yitzchak HaKohein Kook (letter

91), in which he applies the aforementioned Rambam and writes that if the theory of evolution were to be proven, he would reinterpret BeReishit Perek 1.

Rav Slifkin (pg.184-185) rejects the approaches of Professor Aviezer and Dr. Schroeder, arguing that modern scientific findings and the order of Creation presented in BeReishit Perek 1 are incompatible. He also believes that science has definitely proven its case in regards to creation and evolution. Rav Slifkin therefore treads boldly beyond Rambam's claim and asserts that BeReishit Perek 1 should be understood as teaching invaluable lessons rather than the specific order of creation.

There has been highly significant pushback against Rav Slifkin's approach. Had Rav Slifkin adopted a more cautious approach (like Rambam and Rav Kook), he likely would have been spared the severe criticism hurled in his direction. Caution is very much a necessity in such matters. After all, history proves that Rambam's hesitation in regard to the eternity of the world was correct. In the 1960's, as we have discussed before, strong evidence was discovered proving that the world began with a Big Bang. Thus, today virtually all scientists agree that the world had a beginning. This belief is in stark contradiction to scientists from the time of Aristotle and Plato until the 1960's who believed that the world is eternal.

Ramban's³ fiery criticism of Rambam's interpretation of BeReishit Perek 18 should temper any assertion that a portion of the Torah should be interpreted allegorically. Ramban (*Moreh Nevuchim* 2:43) argues that the events described in the first half BeReishit Perek 18, namely the visit of three angels to Avraham Avinu and Sarah Imeinu, occurred only in a vision to Avraham Avinu.

Ramban arrives at this conclusion due to the difficulty regarding spiritual beings, in this case angels, assuming the appearance of human beings and eating food. Ramban rejects this approach in the strongest of terms, writing that “these words which contradict the Torah are forbidden to be heard, much less to be believed.” Ramban's fierce rejection of Rambam's allegorical interpretation should give anyone pause before conclusively asserting that contemporary science has proven the need to reinterpret the Torah in a non-literal manner.

Professor Aviezer and Dr. Schroeder

Many Orthodox Jews feel most comfortable embracing many scientific findings without compromising fidelity to the literal meaning of the Torah.

Ya'akov reinterpreted the promise of long life to refer to the next world rather than this world. The Gemara even concludes that had Elisha ben Avuyah interpreted the Pasuk in the same manner as did his grandson, he would not have abandoned his faith. Rambam may have concluded from this Gemara that where there appears to be a contradiction between Torah and reality, we must reinterpret the Torah.

³ To BeReishit 18:1

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Natan_Slifkin

² A source for Rambam may be found in Rabi Ya'akov's reinterpretation of Shemot 20:12 and Devarim 22:7 in light of the terrible incident of a boy who followed his father's directive to climb a tree and shew away the mother bird before taking the eggs, which was witnessed by Rabi Ya'akov's grandfather, Elisha ben Avuyah (*Kiddushin* 39b). The boy died from an injury sustained when falling down the tree, despite having just fulfilled two of the Torah's commandments for which the reward is long life. Rabi

Professor Aviezer and Dr. Schroeder allow us to have our proverbial cake and eat it too. The question is whether their interpretations are convincing. Additionally, what happens when the scientific consensus revises or even changes its theories? Must our interpretation of the Torah change as well to adjust to each new finding or adjustment to prior assertions?

Conclusion

Humility is a necessity when one addresses the conflict of Torah and science. Science is prone to change on the one hand, and we might not be interpreting the Torah correctly on the other hand. Thus, while one may have a preference for one of the three approaches we outlined, he should not rigidly rule out the other two approaches. When discussing this issue, whether with adults or youngsters, I present all three approaches, as one cannot be certain which of these three approaches is correct.

Moreover, one does not have to rigidly adhere to everything that any one of these authors presents. One may find it very worthwhile to adopt some of the conclusions of each of these three approaches, depending on the level of comfort and cogency one finds with the arguments of each of the authors. Whatever one's perspective on this issue, it is undoubtedly in the best interest of lovers of Torah and science to be familiar with each of these works⁴.

Postscript – Chazal Ahead of Their Time: Pi, The Five Species of Grain, Hemophilia, the Regenerative Property of the Liver, and the Dimensions of Noah's Ark

Regardless of one's evaluation of Rav Meiselman's work, the book includes the following insights with which it is exceedingly worthwhile to be aware. Rav Meiselman (pg. 153-155) notes that Chazal (see Rambam, Peirush HaMishnayot, Eiruvim 1:5 and Tosafot HaRosh to Eiruvim 14a s.v. Kol SheYeish BeHeikeifo) were aware that Pi is an irrational number (an irrational number is one that can be expressed neither as an integer nor as a proper fraction of two integers). This was not known to scholars other than Chazal until the eleventh century.

Rav Meiselman (pg. 155-157) also notes that Chazal (Pesachim 35a) insist that only five grains are capable of becoming Chameitz (leavened). These are wheat, barley, oats, rye and spelt. Rav Meiselman notes that "to this day no additional gluten-containing species (a grain can rise only if it contains gluten) have been found."

He also notes that Chazal were way ahead of their time in recognizing that hemophilia is a hereditary condition and that its gene is passed on through the mother (Yevamot 64b). Similarly, he writes that Chazal were the first to recognize that a liver can regenerate itself (see Mishnah Chullin 3:2).

Rav Meiselman presents these examples to demonstrate that Chazal did not merely arrive at their conclusions based on the available knowledge of the time. Moreover, Rav Meiselman cites

Rav Yehudah HaLeivi (Sefer HaKuzari 4:31), who writes that Chazal arrived at conclusions ahead of their time due to Hashgachah, the subtle intervention and support from Hashem.

Most remarkable, though, is Chazal's statement regarding the dimensions of the Teivah (Noach's ark). Rav Meiselman cites BeReishit Rabbah 31:10 which teaches the following:

"[It is written] 'The length of the Teivah should be three hundred Amot (cubits), fifty Amot wide and thirty Amot high' (BeReishit 6:15). Bar Chityah said....'The Torah has taught us the way of the world – if one wishes to build a boat that will stand off shore (i.e. is stable⁵), one should make its width one-sixth of its length and its height one-tenth of its length.'"

Rav Meiselman cites contemporary studies⁶ which verify that a barge with the Teivah's dimensions has optimal stability. He also notes that Chazal drew only one practical inference from the Teivah, despite the many technical considerations that must have gone into the making and operating of the Teivah. Moreover, Rav Meiselman notes that in the Babylonian flood story, the Ark constructed by the hero is described as a cube, a totally unseaworthy structure⁷.

This fascinating information constitutes an important addition to the many layers of evidence of the divine authorship of the Torah that we among many others have outlined. It also supports Rabi Yehuda HaLeivi's assertion that the Talmud and other classic rabbinic writings were written with Hashgachah, divine assistance and support.

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Questions, comments? Contact us at:

Kol Torah

c/o Torah Academy of Bergen County

1600 Queen Anne Road

Teaneck, NJ 07666

Phone: (201) 837-7696

koltorah@koltorah.org

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⁴ Even if one does not find the core arguments of Professor Aviezer and Dr. Schroeder to be compelling, he might find it worthwhile to read some of their other discussions regarding free will and the long life spans in the early chapters of Sefer BeReishit.

⁵ As interpreted by Radal, a premier commentary to the Midrash.

⁶ Such as S.W. Hong et. Al "Safety Investigation of Noah's Ark in a Seaway," CEN Technical Journal 8 (1) (1994): 26-36, written by staff members of the Korea Research Institute of Ships and Ocean Engineering.

⁷ This contrast is an important addition to the many differences between the Torah and ancient Near Eastern literature. Such differences are compiled by Rav Amnon Bazak in his *Ad HaYom Haze*, chapter 7 (available in English at Yeshivat Har Etzion's Virtual Beit Midrash, <http://etzion.org.il/en/teacher/8095>).