

**LIGHT
FROM
THE
FUTURE
PARSHAS SHEMOS**

BY

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**LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE
ESSAYS ON PARSHAS SHEMOS**

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Dedicated to the Lubavitcher Rebbe, who, more than any Jewish leader, has prepared us for Moshiach and the imminent Redemption

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B”H

INTRODUCTION

The following collection of essays on *parshas Shemos* was taken from the weekly Torah messages that I have been sending to hundreds of individuals over the past 22 years.

These messages were written in the spirit of the talks of the Lubavitcher Rebbe. Several of them are actually based on or adaptations of his essays and discourses on the parsha.

The Lubavitcher Rebbe declared that we are living in unique times. He applied the words of the Midrash to our day:

“The time of your Redemption has arrived.”

The Rebbe stated further that the straightforward way for us to bring about the actual Redemption is by learning what the Torah says about Moshiach and Redemption. While learning Torah in general has the capacity to change our mindset, learning about Moshiach and Redemption has the capacity to alter of exile-constrained way of thinking and cultivating a liberating manner of thinking.

In this spirit, each one of these messages concludes with an application of the Torah lesson of that week to our

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understanding of Moshiach and Redemption, as well as to help us prepare for the coming of Moshiach and the imminent Redemption.

It is my fervent hope that these essays will contribute to the process of changing our *galus/exile* mindset into a Moshiach mindset, which is effected by the study of these themes in Torah.. And may this effort contribute to the imminent Redemption through our righteous Moshiach. Amen.

The parsha Shemos is obviously a fundamental parsha because it deals with the beginning of the process to get out of Egyptian bondage with the birth of Moses and G-d's communication to Him to be the redeemer of Israel.

ESSAY ONE

EXODUS OR NAMES?

One cannot be liberated from bondage, without a sense of self-hood.

A person who is not secure with his/her own identity is susceptible to virtually every other influence that imposes itself on the individual. This is not true freedom.

We cannot surrender ourselves to G-d's authority and accept the Torah at Sinai, without having an identity to surrender.

Bereft of an identity, we will acquire everyone else's identity. And, these multiple identities are antithetical to accepting G-d's desired way of life, which is based on unity.

ESSAY ONE

EXODUS OR NAMES?

What kind of a Name is “Names?”

This week we begin reading the second of the five books of Moses. To most people, this Biblical book is referred to simply as the book of Exodus, because this book's most dramatic narrative is the miraculous deliverance of the Jewish People from Egyptian bondage.

The traditional name for this book, however, is not Exodus, but rather "*Shemos*" or "names." Ostensibly, the reason for this title is the fact that this Biblical book begins with the verse: "And these are the **names** of the Children of Israel who have come to the land of Egypt..." It is common for a book or chapter to be named after its first, or one of its first, words.

The question begs to be asked:

Why would we name a book, containing some of the most central themes and historical events of Judaism such as the Exodus, the giving of the Torah at Mount Sinai, the building of the *Mishkan* (Portable Sanctuary in the desert)

etc., "names?" Certainly, the fact that the word "*Shemos*" appears at the beginning of the book is not an adequate reason for its selection as the name of the book. Shouldn't the name capture the most riveting and poignant aspects of the book, rather than be just one of its first words?

Maintaining a name: the Force against Assimilation

The answer lies in the significance of the Hebrew names of the Jews in Egypt. Our Sages inform us that notwithstanding the forces of assimilation in Egypt, the Jews did not change their names. No matter how far a Jew might have strayed from his/her Jewishness in Egypt, they never lost their Jewish identity.

It was this tenacious attachment to their identities that enabled the Jews to leave Egypt and receive the Torah at Sinai. While it was regrettable that they did not translate the realization of who they were into what they did, they still retained this one formidable redeeming quality; they never lost sight of who they were.

This is indeed the secret of Jewish survival throughout all of our history. To be sure, Judaism is more than just retaining one's identity and name, but it cannot survive without that identity. It may be likened to the construction of a building that has many stories. Without its foundation, it cannot last; the building will ultimately topple. And while

it is self-understood that a foundation alone does not suffice, it is nevertheless the first and most solid part of the structure. Similarly, retaining one's name or identity is the foundation and bedrock of Jewish existence, without which there cannot be a Jewish structure.

Thus, the second book of the Torah, detailing the very foundations of the Jewish nation, is appropriately called "*Shemos*-Names," because it is this stubborn attachment to one's Jewish identity—no matter what—that is the basis for everything else discussed in this book.

The Key to Liberation :Acceptance of Torah and Building a Sanctuary

One cannot be liberated from bondage, without a sense of self-hood. By definition, a person who is not secure with his/her own identity is susceptible to virtually every other influence that imposes itself on the individual. This is not true freedom.

One cannot surrender oneself to G-d's authority and accept the Torah at Sinai, without having an identity to surrender. Bereft of an identity, one will acquire everyone else's identity. And, these multiple identities are antithetical to accepting G-d's desired way of life, which is based on unity.

One cannot create a Mishkan, a sanctuary, for G-d without or within, when one is devoid of an identity. Dwelling implies the process of being internalized within someone. One who possesses no selfhood cannot be a vessel to receive and absorb the Divine presence. (This does not contradict the well-known Chassidic teaching that to be a Sanctuary to G-d one must be humble. There is an obvious difference between an empty—and therefore a receptive vessel—and no vessel at all.)

Hence all of the central themes of the Book of Exodus hinge on *Shemos*, the names of the Jewish People; never losing one's Jewish identity.

What was true then, when we were liberated from the first exile, is equally true today as we await the final Redemption by Moshiach. The key to Redemption is *Shemos*, never losing sight of our names. We will leave, however, the deeper explanation for the power of a name to bring about liberation and Redemption for the next essay.

ESSAY TWO

DON'T FORGET YOUR NAME

When a person or a nation degenerates, but, nevertheless remembers their G-dly essence and are aware of their unique role in G-d's plan, there is much to salvage.

There is hope.

ESSAY TWO

DON'T FORGET YOUR NAME

A Name: Beyond the Utilitarian

What is a name? Is there any significance to a name beyond its utilitarian function, which is to identify people and objects? Obviously, if people and things did not have names, chaos and confusion would prevail. When G-d wanted to confound the people who built the tower of Babel, our sages tell us, he caused them to misidentify the names of objects. When one would ask for a hammer, for example, his co-worker would send him a brick. In return, the brick would be thrown right back at the one who sent it originally.

But the significance of names goes beyond its practical value. When G-d created Adam he brought all of the earth's creatures before him, so that Adam can name them. Our sages point out that G-d used Adam's ability to name all the world's creatures as proof that he was more intelligent than the heavenly angels.

Jewish mystical thought explains that a Hebrew name is more than just a convention. It is the representation of the

Divine force that gives life to the person or object. Adam's wisdom was that he was able to see the Divine energy contained within each of the world's creatures.

Salvageable

With this introduction, we will gain some appreciation for the otherwise bland title Jewish tradition has accorded this most exciting and colorful book best known to us, and in the non-Jewish world, as the Book of Exodus. In Hebrew it is simply the Book of *Shemos*, or the Book of Names.

This book of Exodus, features three major historical and spiritual events, the Exodus of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, the giving of the Torah at Sinai and the construction of the *Mishkan*, the temporary Sanctuary G-d chose in the desert. What do names have to do with these pivotal events?

Our sages tell us that the Jews were liberated from Egypt because, in spite of their general lowly spiritual state at the time of the Exodus, they possessed several redeeming qualities; one of them, as discussed in the preceding essay, was that they did not change their names.

On the surface, the fact that they did not change their names was an indication that they did not wish to assimilate. But, if the Jews—as our sages put it—

descended into the “forty-nine gates of impurity,” of what value was the apparently superficial gesture of not changing a name?

The answer lies in what we discussed is the deeper significance of a Hebrew name. By not changing their names they were acknowledging that they possessed a Divine energy that accorded them a distinct role within the scheme of creation. They were not just nationalists who craved an independent identity that would parallel Egyptian culture. They realized that they possessed a unique spiritual potential. They wanted to be free, so that they could actualize this spiritual potential.

When a person or a nation degenerates, but, nevertheless remembers their G-dly essence and are aware of their unique role in G-d's plan, there is much to salvage. There is hope.

If the Book of Exodus is about the liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt, their entering into the covenant with G-d at Sinai and G-d's choice to dwell among them in the *Mishkan*, the driving force behind all these events was the ability of the Jews to recognize their G-d given energies, represented by their names. Hence the title of this book is *Shemos-names*.

While Exodus might sound more impressive as a title for this book, the word “*Shemos-names*” actually represents the

soul of the entire Book of Exodus. All of the themes of this book, from the actual Exodus through the Giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai to the construction of G-d's Sanctuary, would be meaningless without the acknowledgment of the soul that pervaded the Jewish people, the Torah and the Sanctuary. Furthermore, because the Jewish people did not lose touch with their essence they were worthy recipients of the Torah and of G-d's desire to dwell in their midst.

Names: The key to the Future Redemption

In addition to the obvious lesson, about the importance of retaining and using our Jewish names, there is another deeper message we are to gather from the title *Shemos*.

We are living in times that parallel the era of the Exodus from Egypt. We are standing on the threshold of the future Redemption. What is the power that we must access and manifest in these crucial times to make us worthy and ready for the contemporary process of liberation from exile?

The answer once again lies in the deeper significance of names. We must open our eyes to see beyond the exterior. We must learn to see the inner nature of everything that exists, because one of the defining characteristics of the Messianic Age will be its capacity to reveal, that which is

hidden. The secrets of the Torah will be divulged. The secrets of nature will also become manifest. The secret recesses of our souls will similarly be revealed. As a preparation for the Age of Redemption, when all the secrets will be revealed, we must now learn to penetrate beneath the surface of our beings and recognize the inner dimension of all of existence as well.

When we look at another person we should see beyond the facade; see the person's soul and inner beauty.

When we look at an event—happy or otherwise—we should attempt to see it from within, as the unfolding of G-d's plan, rather than some arbitrary occurrence. This is what *Geulah* or Redemption is all about. Liberating everything from the covers that prevent us from realizing its true inner nature.

We should look for the name, the Divine identity of everything in our world.

ESSAY THREE

IT DEPENDS ON THE NAME

Yehudah, which means gratitude, is a name that is associated with Redemption.

Only a person who is free from the pressures that come from the outside can truly express sincere gratitude to, and full acceptance, of G-d.

ESSAY THREE

IT DEPENDS ON THE NAME

Names of Redemption

The book of Exodus opens with a list of names of the sons of Jacob who came to Egypt with Jacob. It then proceeds to describe the way in which the Jewish people were eventually enslaved by Pharaoh.

The Midrash comments on the names of the sons of Jacob enumerated here, and explains that each of these names expresses the theme of their Redemption.

It seems that the Midrash is troubled by the need for the Torah to repeat the names of Jacob's sons in this parsha. Haven't we already read their names repeatedly in the preceding book of Genesis. To which the Midrash seems to be responding. Yes, we know their names, but here their names assume a new character; they are symbols of Redemption. It is crucial for us to know that despite the fact that the twelve sons of Jacob came to Egypt, the land that ultimately oppressed them for hundreds of years, nevertheless they arrived in Egypt with their names and the

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liberating nature of their souls that was represented by these names. Even as they were to become slaves they were inherently free.

The Midrash then enumerates the twelve items related to Redemption that are hinted in these twelve names:

Reuvein, which is related to the word that means “he saw”, reflects G-d who saw and responded to their suffering.

Shimon, which derives from the word that means “he heard”, reflects G-d who heard and responded to their cries.

Levi, which means attachment, reflects the way G-d attached Himself and empathized with the oppressed Jews.

Yehudah, which means to gratefully acknowledge, alludes to the way the Jewish people thanked and praised G-d.

Yissachar, which means “there is reward”, refers to the great wealth of Egypt that the Jews received when they were liberated.

Zevulun refers to the ultimate construction of the Holy Temple, where G-d would dwell amongst the people—the end result of their liberation.

Dan, which means judgment, refers to the way the Egyptian tormentors were judged and punished by G-d.

Naftali, has the root of the word that means “dripping honey,” a reference to the Torah that was given to them after the Exodus; a Torah that is as sweet as honey.

Gad, which means a coriander seed, alludes to the Manna, that descended for them in the desert upon their exodus from Egypt, that the Torah says resembled a coriander seed.

Asher, which means “happy” or “praise”, describes the way the other nations will be happy for our liberation and heap praise on us.

Yosef, which means to add, alludes to the way G-d will in the future redeem us again.

Binyamin, contains the word “right” and it alludes to the fact that G-d liberated us with His “right hand.”

All of these twelve names/symbols—with the exception of Yehudah and Asher—refer to the things G-d did or will do with respect to the liberation of the Jewish people. Obviously, all of these traits that G-d exhibited are intended for us to emulate in the spirit of the commandment to “follow in His ways.”

The Exceptions

One exception to this pattern is the tribe of Asher, whose name reflects the positive reaction of the nations of the

world to our liberation. That too can be understood as G-d's gift to us. He will cause the other nations to appreciate us and be happy for our liberation.

The other exception is more difficult to understand—the tribe of Yehudah. Yehudah, as noted, represents our expression of gratitude to G-d. Why couldn't the Midrash find something that G-d did that tied in with the name Yehudah?

The question is magnified in light of the fact cited by the Talmud that the name Yehudah actually contains the four letters of G-d name. Yehudah is the most G-dly of all the names and yet the message it conveys here is something that we do, and not something G-d does.

The One thing G-d “cannot” Give us...

One answer to this question is that G-d could give us everything, with one lone exception. There is one thing, however, that we must give Him, as it were. He cannot make us thank and acknowledge Him. That is something that must come from us. If you tell someone to accept someone else as your leader, it is not a full acceptance. If you force someone to say thank you, it is devoid of any meaning. Yehudah represents our acceptance of G-d as our King and Liberator. It derives from the depths of our souls and must be self-motivated.

Unlike the other traits—where we “take our cue” from G-d, by seeing G-d’s behavior first and then applying it to ourselves—accepting G-d as our G-d, by definition, starts with us. If He has to impose Himself on us, that is not a complete acceptance. That is not what Yehudah stands for and that it is not part of the process of Redemption.

Yehudah the Symbol of Redemption

Therefore, Yehudah is a name that is associated with Redemption, not only because it was a response to their liberation from Egypt, but because only a person who is free from the pressures that come from the outside can truly express sincere gratitude to, and full acceptance, of G-d.

The same is true about the way we prepare for the future Redemption through Moshiach, who must be a scion of King David, a descendent of Yehudah. The phrase often employed in rabbinic Moshiach, a human leader, ideally will not impose himself on us. His leadership given to him by G-d cannot be complete unless the people willingly and joyfully accept his role as the leader. Towards that end, we must learn more about Moshiach from the classical sources of Judaism.

ESSAY FOUR

NAMES, LANGUAGE, SLANDER AND CHASTITY

The virtue of not changing their names suggests that their identities were intact.

The worst part of slavery is arguably the loss of identity.

A slave is just chattel; the property of his master no different from his house or his animal.

Even the most benign form of slavery, is still slavery, wherein the slave has no identity.

ESSAY FOUR

NAMES, LANGUAGE, SLANDER AND CHASTITY

The “Head” Verse

The book of Exodus introduces us to the saga of Egyptian bondage and the Exodus through which we became a nation. And, although the book begins with the bondage, the book in its entirety is referred to as “the Book of Liberation” (or “Exodus”). This indicates that even the part that deals with bondage contains the seeds for the liberation. And it stands to reason that this theme of liberation is especially alluded to in the opening verse. The beginning of a book is much like the head/brain of a body that contains the life force of the entire body. Accordingly, the head of Exodus contains within it the information needed for the Exodus.

And since the Exodus from Egypt is seen by our Sages as the paradigm for the future Redemption, the opening verse can therefore be seen as the key to understanding what we must do now to activate the process of liberation.

The first verse reads: “And these are the names of the children of Israel who came to Egypt with Jacob, each man came with his household”

What message does this verse contain that is the key to understanding the process of Redemption? At first glance this verse is rather prosaic; serving only as an introduction to the names of Jacob’s sons discussed in the following verses.

The Four Virtues

The Midrash (Vayikra Rabbah) states that there were four factors that were responsible for the exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt: a) They did not change their names; b) They did not change their language; c) They did not slander one another; d) They were not unchaste

These virtues empowered them to withstand the pressures of exile and to ultimately be the key to their liberation. And if we carefully scrutinize this introductory verse we can find hints to all four of these virtues.

The word Shemos-names, which is the name of this week’s parsha and of the entire book of Exodus, stresses the fact that the children of Israel maintained their names. As the Midrash states:

“They entered Egypt with these names and they left Egypt with these names.”

The fact that they are referred to here as B’nei Yisroel, the children of Israel, and not Bnei Yaakov, the children of Jacob, alludes to their national identity. They were not just a family but a nation. What was it that made them a nation? It was their common language.

Now, their description as “the children of Israel” actually suggests two unifying features:

First, as was stated, they spoke the same language. We have already learnt in the Tower of Babel narrative that the division of humanity into disparate nations occurred when they could no longer speak the same language. The fact that the children of Jacob are designated here as belonging to one nation— “the children of Israel”—suggests that they were one nation with one language.

Second: They are referred to here as the sons of Israel and not sons of Jacob. The name Jacob is associated with subterfuge, evasion, crookedness, going in a circuitous fashion and being subordinate to others. Jacob, therefore, had to resort to guile to receive the blessings from his father, although he was entitled to them by virtue of his purchase of the birthright from Esau. Israel, by contrast, implies directness, nobility, integrity and being a master of one’s life.

The foregoing difference between Jacob and Israel can also be applied to language. To refer to the children of Jacob as “the children of Israel” exemplifies the nobility of language of the Jewish people even in Egyptian exile. There was no slander and divisive language.

And finally, when the Torah states in the opening verse that “each man came with his household” the implication is that the integrity of the family was intact. They did not degenerate into the corrupt mores of the Egyptian people who were steeped in immorality.

Identity, Perspective, Essential Unity, Mastery

To better understand these four virtues and how they relate to Redemption we ought to reflect on their underlying character.

The virtue of not changing their names suggests that their identities were intact. The worst part of slavery is arguably the loss of identity. A slave is just chattel; the property of his master no different from his house or his animal. Even the most benign form of slavery, is still slavery, wherein the slave has no identity.

However, even when someone strips us of our legal identity and denies us the ability to be who we are, it is crucial that we do not accept that for ourselves. Frequently, people who

lose their identity internalize that loss and embrace the identity of their captors. This is known as the “Stockholm Syndrome” where the hostage accepts his role as an extension of his captor and ceases to consider himself an independent human being.

The fact that the Jewish people did not change their names was their way of not accepting the status that was imposed on them. They were never truly slaves and therefore they were capable of being liberated.

However, one can be free in terms of his or her essential identity, but still embrace the nomenclature and thought process of slavery. There are many Jews, tragically, who have adopted the language of the culture in which they live. And though they may proud of their Jewish heritage they still think in non-Jewish terms. Maimonides writes in a letter that one could use the Holy Tongue for vulgar and non-Jewish themes, whereas a secular language can be the vehicle for the conveyance of holy teachings. Not changing our language is more about not changing the way we think about matters. The Chassidic scholar, Rabbi Zalman Posner, authored a book entitled: “Speak English, but Think Jewish,” echoing Maimonides’ sentiment that the essential thing in language is the value system behind it.

To cite a few examples: A rabbi, some think of as the Jewish equivalent of the minister; the synagogue as the

Jewish parallel of a non-Jewish house of worship; Chanukah as the Jewish version of the non-Jewish winter holiday etc. And nowhere is this distortion more evident than in the subject of Redemption and Moshiach, which some Jews conceive of in non-Jewish terms.

Thus, not changing their language means that they not only maintained their Jewish identity, but also their conception of Jewish ideas; their thought processes remained Jewish.

Inherent Unity

However, we could still be in exile if we are fragmented and in conflict with one another. Our unity denies our enemy the ability to crush and enslave us. We are more powerful united not only because our ideas and values are superior to our oppressors, but we also enjoy a quantitative edge over them. Our adversaries are never truly united, for each one is driven by his ego that conflicts with the other oppressor's ego. Their unity is a contrived and temporary one. No sooner do they reach their goal, do they split into warring factions. Coalitions of evil do not represent true unity,

By contrast, when the Jewish people act with love and respect toward one another, exemplified by the absence of slander amongst them, it is a reflection of an inner

harmony and unity that truly endows them with greater numbers because they are not disparate forces as their enemy is.

However, even when we are proud Jews, speak Jewishly and are united, we can still be in exile when the purity of our family life is compromised. When we become slaves to our passions and our morals are loose we lose our status as inherently free people. Not succumbing to the seductive influences around the Jews in Egyptian bondage demonstrated that they were inherently free people even as they were in exile. Moreover, when the family unit is strong it can withstand the pressures of exile.

The Four Cups of Wine

It may be suggested that these four virtues—representing four manifestation of inner freedom that empowered them to ultimately be freed—correspond to the four cups of wine we drink at the Seder. These four cups, the Talmud tells us, correspond to the four expressions of Redemption that the Torah employs in next week's parsha. It may be suggested that these four expressions relate to the four areas that must be cultivated for us to be redeemed: We must know who we are; speak and think in Jewish terms; recognize our inherent Jewish unity and gain mastery over our desires.

In contemporary terms, not changing our names means more than having and using our Jewish names. It also means that we should know that our most essential identity is that we are Jews. While we can alter virtually anything else that identifies us—such as our political views, our affiliations etc.—we cannot alter our essential identities that we are Jews.

This realization must be followed by recognizing that as Jews we have to think about everything in Jewish terms. To achieve this “brain transplant” we must study Torah, which has the capacity to condition us to think Jewishly.

The third element that leads to Redemption is unity. Notwithstanding our legitimate differences, we are inherently one and connected to the Jew that is most distant from us, geographically, politically, emotionally, intellectually and even religiously. We are truly one people! And as one people there is no force in the world that can prevent us from marching towards the final Redemption.

And the fourth and final aspect of Redemption is gaining control of our own animal soul. Moshiach is described as “riding on a donkey.” The Hebrew word for donkey also means “materialism.” The Maharal explains that Moshiach gains mastery over his material interest. This means that to cultivate the internal Moshiach—which is the catalyst to

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reveal the external Moshiach—is by exercising control over our inner “donke

ESSAY FIVE

BORN A LEADER

G-d's first encounter with Moses at the burning bush occurred when he was grazing the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro.

According to the Midrash, this was G-d's final test to determine Moses qualification for the job of leader.

By showing how he was concerned with every little lamb, giving it what it needed and not only caring for the flock as a whole, he demonstrated the crucial ingredient of a true leader who is concerned for every individual member of the community not just the community at large.

But, even that was not sufficient to place Moses in the leadership role.

The final step seems to be his humility and reluctance to accept this tremendous responsibility.

ESSAY FIVE

BORN A LEADER

Moses Sheltered?

Moses is raised by Pharaoh and his daughter *Bitya* in the cloistered environment of Pharaoh's palace. And while we can assume that Moses knew that he was a member of the Hebrews, it is somewhat surprising, however, that on Moses' first occasion to venture into the outside, he observes how a Jewish slave is beaten by an Egyptian taskmaster. Moses then proceeds to kill the Egyptian, for which reason he was compelled to flee.

The fact that Moses—who was sheltered from his people— put his own life on the limb for the mistreatment of his brethren teaches us that Moses' leadership talents were already blossoming at a very young age.

Indeed, as a careful overview of this week's *parsha* will demonstrate, Moses did not just assume the mantle of leadership out of the blue. Neither did he seek it and strive for it. It was a process that began at birth and manifested

itself at different key points in Moses' life.

“Moses was Good”

In truth, leadership is not something that can be learned; one must be born with the innate quality of leadership. And more than any other leader, the Torah highlights his uniqueness at the time of his birth. When he was born, the Torah says, they “saw that he was good.”

The obvious question that arises here is that every newborn child is good, especially in the eyes of its mother. What does the Torah mean when it singles out Moses for distinction as a good child?

One of the answers the Talmud provides is that when he was born he illuminated the entire house. Moses' goodness expressed itself in the light that he radiated.

However, this answer itself begs for clarification. First of all, the Torah says that he was “good” and not that he was light. Granted, the first entity that was ever declared to be good was the creation of light, when the Torah said “And G-d saw that the light was good,” hence the association between goodness and light. The question remains, nevertheless, why doesn't the Torah simply say that when he was born, he illuminated the entire house?

To answer this question we should focus our attention on

another question. What does the Torah mean when it says that “G-d saw that it was good?” How could G-d’s creation not be good?

Definition of Good

The answer is that “good” in the context of creation as well as the birth of Moses does not simply mean that it was not bad, but rather that when it was created it already possessed the potential to realize the purpose for which it was created. Good must thus be understood to mean that what G-d created was created with all the potential power to realize G-d’s purpose.

Hence when the Torah tells us that Moses was good at the time of his birth, it means that even at the time of birth not only did he possess the potential for which purpose his soul came into the world, it was clearly visible to all that saw him. His ultimate mission to bring light, hope and comfort to the Jewish people of that generation and for all future generations was evident at the very moment he was born.

In other words, while most people might be destined for leadership positions, that potential is not necessarily defined until a much later stage in life. With regard to Moses, however, at the time of his birth it was clear as to what was going to be his mission.

However, even Moses did not just seamlessly grow into his position of leadership. He had to display some rare moment of dedication to the people he was going to lead; prepared to even risk his own future, and perhaps life, to defend them.

Thus, the Torah relates how he was so indignant and pained by the suffering of his brethren that he reacted in the most drastic manner. This was not some impulsive reaction, but the fire of his soul that was emerging. While other adolescents exhibit various signs of development that point to their attainment of certain biological milestones, Moses entry into that age was marked by his mature and sophisticated sense of concern for others.

Moses Third Step of Development: A Shepherd

But even this act of zealousness in defense of his fellow Jew was not yet enough to make him ready for his role as liberator and leader of the Jewish nation.

The third step, according to the Midrash, was his role as a shepherd. The Torah makes a point that G-d's first encounter to with Moses at the burning bush occurred when he was grazing the sheep of his father-in-law Jethro. According to the Midrash, this was G-d's final test to determine Moses qualification for the job of leader. By showing how he was concerned with every little lamb,

giving it what it needed and not only caring for the flock as a whole, he demonstrated the crucial ingredient of a true leader who is concerned for every individual member of the community not just the community at large.

But, even that was not sufficient to place Moses in the leadership role. The final step seems to be his humility and reluctance to accept this tremendous responsibility.

To summarize:

Jewish leadership, is something one is born with, and the signs of which are already apparent at a tender age. Nevertheless, a true leader must demonstrate his “fanatical” concern for the suffering of his brethren even when it involves personal risk. In addition, this zealousness must be complemented with the nurturing and warm feeling for every individual, no matter how insignificant that individual may appear. And finally, a true leader must be imbued with profound humility, who seeks not the glory.

All of these qualities that were exhibited by Moses were also the hallmark of all great future leaders of the Jewish people. However, of all the greatest Jewish leaders, the person who is designated as Moshiach will be the ultimate heir to the legacy of Moses

ESSAY SIX

SEEDS OF LIBERATION

The Rebbe explained the reason for celebrating our birthdays is because it is the anniversary of G-d's declaration to us:

“You are needed and special!

“Your soul is unique and its contribution to the world cannot be matched by anyone else.

“If I had another soul identical to yours, it would not have been necessary for Me to send your soul into this world.”

G-d, we are taught, does not do redundant things.

ESSAY SIX

SEEDS OF LIBERATION

Liberating Names!

The book of Shemos-Exodus begins with the story of our Egyptian bondage, followed by the description of our Exodus. The first parsha of this book, Shemos (which shares its name with the entire book), covers the period of our bondage. It discusses the bitter exile and enslavement, Pharaoh's attempt to annihilate all newborn Hebrew males, Moses' selection by G-d as the redeemer, followed by Moses' failed attempt to have Pharaoh free the Jews from slavery. Moses proved unable then even to convince Pharaoh simply to ameliorate conditions for his brethren. Indeed, the parsha concludes with Moses' complaint to G-d about how badly things had deteriorated since he was sent to demand liberation.

Matters had come to the point where even Moses, the redeemer of Israel, could not see a light at the end of the proverbial tunnel.

Seeds of Liberation

Yet, this entire Parsha, with all of its exile/bondage drama, is part of a greater book known as the book of Exodus! We are thus compelled to conclude that when we dig deeper we can find the seeds of liberation in this Parsha.

Indeed, our Sages tell us that the opening verse itself contains within it the secret of our ultimate liberation from Egypt:

At the very beginning of the parsha, the Torah lists the 12 sons of Jacob who came to Egypt with their families. The Midrash comments that they-and their progeny-- kept their Hebrew names throughout their sojourn in Egypt. The fact that they kept hold of their identities as children of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob gave them the power to survive and ultimately be freed from bondage.

The lesson for our times is clear: As we stand on the threshold of Redemption, we must never allow our Jewish identities to be compromised. Preserving our identity means much more than surviving the forces of assimilation; it will actually empower us to overcome the forces of exile and be redeemed.

Liberating by Proliferating

Another “Seed of Redemption” can be found in the Torah’s description of the incredible rate at which the Hebrew population grew. The Torah uses six expressions to describe this growth:

“The children of Israel were **fruitful** and **swarmed** and **increased** and became **very, very strong**.”

These six expressions, our Sages teach us, indicate that the women gave birth to sextuplets!

On the surface it would seem that it was their proliferation that Pharaoh found threatening and propelled him to enact even more harsh decrees against them. In truth, the opposite is true. Their proliferation actually was the force that led to their ultimate freedom.

Birth of Every Child Hastens Redemption

Our Sages (Talmud Yevamos 62b) teach us that the Messianic Age will come about when all the souls destined to enter this world have done so. The birth of every child with a Jewish soul introduces a new liberating force. Their aggregate force becomes so powerful that nothing can stand in the way of their freedom.

It is reasonable to assume—especially when the prophet Micah compares the future Redemption to our Exodus

from Egypt—that the same was true with respect to the Exodus. Each newborn soul brought them closer to their Redemption from bondage.

The lesson is clear. Contrary to all the negative prognosticators and their dire predictions, the material condition of society has improved commensurately with the increase of the world's population. This is because the introduction of each soul unleashes G-dly power that changes the very fabric of the physical world, rendering it less resistant to the Divine liberating forces.

Quadruple Vision

We can find another “Seed of Redemption” in this week's parsha:

When Pharaoh commanded the Hebrew Midwives to murder all the newborn male children, he told them:

“When you help the Hebrew women give birth, and **you will see** them on the birth-stool, if it is a son...”

The words “and you will see” appear in three other, totally unrelated, places in the Torah. Traditional rules of Torah construction encourage us to find the common underlying theme that runs through these references:

When Moses sent the Twelve Spies to survey the Land of Cana'an, he told them: “**you will see** the land...”

In another verse, where the Torah commands us to wear tzitzis-fringes on the corners of our garments, it says of them, “**you will see** it and remember the commandments of G-d...”.

Finally Moses and Aaron used the same expression: “in the morning **you will see** the glory of G-d...” when they informed the Hebrews that G-d would provide Manna to them the next morning.

How can we connect all these Torah references to **seeing**? And how do they relate to the process of liberation?

These expressions are used in four different contexts: the birth-stool, the land, the tzitzis and G-d’s glory.

The sages tell us that “G-d’s glory in the morning” alludes to the Messianic Age when G-d’s light and glory will be fully revealed.

How are we to bring that about?

Reflect on Three Things

One interpretation of these three other references to “seeing” is based on Ethics of the Fathers. We are counseled there to reflect on three things to avoid coming close to sin:

“Know that you come from a putrid drop, that you’re going to a place of worms and maggots, and that you will be judged by G-d.”

These three reflections parallel three things the Torah says we will see:

The “birth-stool” is linked to the putrid drop; the “land” is the resting place of worms and maggots where we all must end up; and the reference to seeing the “tzitzis” to be reminded of G-d’s commandments can be understood to refer to G-d’s judgment.

When understood at a literal, superficial level, these three reflections appear intended to humble and intimidate us so that we don’t get out of line.

When we delve more deeply into the three things which the Torah says we should see, we discover a far more positive understanding of them and how they relate to the process of Redemption.

Celebrate Your Birthday

First, it is necessary for us to look at the birth-stool; and through it, the significance of bringing a new soul into the world.

The Rebbe explained the real reason for celebrating our birthdays. It is the anniversary of G-d’s declaration to us

that “you are needed and special! Your soul is unique and its contribution to the world cannot be matched by anyone else. If I had another soul identical to yours, it would not have been necessary for Me to send your soul into this world.” G-d, we are taught, does not do redundant things.

Moreover, as mentioned above, the birth of every child is instrumental in hastening the time of Redemption. In other words, while each soul is capable of making a unique and unprecedented contribution to the world, each and every soul also brings us closer to the Redemption, first just by showing up and then exponentially by translating our capabilities into practice.

The Holy Land Paradigm

Second, we must “see the land.” Moses’ intention in sending the Twelve Spies was for them to bring back glowing reports about the land so that the Jewish people would enter it with relish and delight. After all, Psalm 106 refers to the land of Israel as “a land of desire.”

One of the necessary preparations for the Messianic Age is to show our delight in the land and that we will never relinquish any part of it; every inch of the Land of Israel is precious to us.

Moreover, “seeing the land” can be understood as looking beyond its physical assets to reflect more deeply on its inner spiritual dimension. We must see the land as a Divine gift. It is the place which evinces a desire to fulfill G-d’s will.

The Land of Israel, known as the Holy Land, is the model for the entire world. The terms “land” and “holy” are usually understood to be mutually exclusive. One who is obsessed with the physicality and materiality of the world is not holy. The Land of Israel demonstrates that there is no meaningful dichotomy between the physical and the spiritual. The Land of Israel presents us with a paradigm for the entire world to follow. And in the Messianic Age, the dynamic synthesis of Holy and Land will spread and extend to the entire world.

Thus, “seeing the land” is the message we must internalize now as we stand on the cusp of that Age: we must transform our lives and our environment into a Holy Land in preparation for the age when that synthesis of so-called opposites will become the manifest reality for all.

See *All* of the Mitzvos!

The third preparation for the Redemption is seeing the tzitzis, which serve as a constant reminder of observing **all** of the commandments. While every Mitzvah stands on its

own, there are certain Mitzvos that encompass all the others. One such Mitzvah is tzitzis because it relates to the number 613, the total number of commandments in the Torah. (Rashi cites a Midrashic commentary that the word tzitzis has the numerical value of 600. When we add the eight strands and five knots of the tzitzis, it yields the number 613.)

While every mitzvah prepares us for the future, we must be reminded of this and prepared for the prospect of observing all of the commandments, including the hundreds we are denied because of exile and the lack of a Beis Hamikdash in Jerusalem.

Awareness that our ability to fulfill all of the commandments is compromised by virtue of our being in exile is integral to our preparation for Moshiach. We must therefore look at the tzitzis and recognize that we need to bring wholeness and integrity to our Judaism. That quest, in and of itself, is a force that brings us closer to and prepares us for the Redemption.

Thus, when we see, a) the value of every new soul, b) appreciate the Land of Israel paradigm, and c) be mindful of and crave the totality of Jewish observance, we will be ready for the final Redemption. We, while still in exile, will have internalized the primary energies of Redemption.

ESSAY SEVEN

A MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO TAMPER WITH

As Jews we must remember that exile conditions, no matter how good – nay, especially when they are good – should never lull us into thinking that we can feel secure living a non-Jewish lifestyle in exile.

The longer we delude ourselves that we are just like everyone else and we can prosper indefinitely living an exile rich life the more painful and destructive it is to our chances of being liberated.

ESSAY SEVEN

A MIND IS A TERRIBLE THING TO TAMPER WITH

Progressive Oppression

This week's parsha introduces us to the saga of slavery and persecution of the Children of Israel. Most of us are familiar with the general picture of how the Jews were beaten as they were forced into building cities for Pharaoh, as depicted in the Torah. There are also many nuances of slavery and oppression that were transmitted orally for many centuries as well as information that can be detected by reading between the lines that are not so familiar.

One such piece of information is taken from the Talmud that describes the bondage as a progressive process and experience. Pharaoh did not wake up one day and order the Hebrews enslaved. That would have not worked. Instead Pharaoh announced a project to rebuild Egypt that asked for patriotic volunteers to join the Egyptian him in building. Even Pharaoh himself participated. Besides the tribe of Levi, all the Israelites enthusiastically joined. Slowly, but surely, they were regimented into a work force.

When Pharaoh and the other Egyptian volunteers “dropped out” of the drive, the Israelites discovered how they were duped. They were no longer paid for their services and they had an entire apparatus of taskmasters over them who made sure they would continue to do their work.

It did not end there. As time progressed the oppression intensified as well.

This incremental approach to their slavery is reflected in the tradition of eating Romaine Lettuce as the preferred choice for bitter herbs at the Passover Seder. Horseradish, the Talmud says is actually the third choice for the fulfillment of the mitzvah to eat bitter herbs at the Seder. (Many have the custom of eating both.)

How does Romaine lettuce qualify as a “bitter” herb?

The answer is that the root of the Romaine lettuce plant, when left in the ground becomes intolerably bitter. It begins sweet and it gets progressively more and more bitter, precisely as the Egyptian bondage began with Pharaoh’s sweet talk and ended with them being subjected to the most depraved forms of oppression.

Affliction with Tolerance?

Some commentators detect another deceptive practice of the Egyptians intended to maximize the suffering of the

Jews. In the Biblical text we find the following description of how they were taxed, which was actually the first thing they did to oppress the Jews:

“They appointed over them tax collectors to afflict them with their burdens, and they built store cities for Pharaoh, namely Pisom and Raamses.”

Now the Hebrew phrase for “afflict them with their burdens” can also be rendered: “afflict them with their tolerance.” How does being tolerant qualify as a form of affliction?

The Torah anthology *Likkutei Basar Likkutei* cites a commentator that explains that the Egyptians were tolerant in the way they collected their taxes. They did not pressure them to pay their taxes. The Israelites were thus in total shock when the Egyptians came to collect all the past taxes that accumulated over time.

In other words, their tolerance was actually an insidious device used to lull their victims into a state of complacency so as to maximize the pain in the end.

This form of torture is worse than just physical torture because the human being is not just a physical being. A human being is also in possession of a mind that is as much subject to abuse and torture as the body. In fact, mental anguish is arguably as painful as physical pain.

Moreover, physical pain will be reduced or enhanced based on one's mental attitude and health.

Indeed, the Talmud states that verbal abuse that causes mental anguish to another is more serious an offense in several respects than actually stealing from a person. "Whereas theft affects one's money, verbal abuse affects one's body. And whereas money is subject to remuneration, mental anguish is not."

Mental Anguish the Worst Torture

On a spiritual plane we can understand why mental anguish can be so devastating, in some instances even more than physical abuse and how it can significantly exacerbate physical pain.

A human being is a composite of a body and a soul. But the bridge between the two is the mind. Good health thus requires three things:

A healthy body, a healthy soul and a healthy connection between the two.

That link is one's mind. The brain is the physical organ that is most receptive to the spiritual dimension of the soul and it is the organ that channels all of the soul's energy to the rest of the body and its faculties.

Since the mind is the link between the soul and the body, whenever we tamper with the mind it can cause problems with the body, the soul and the connection between the two.

Whatever the explanation, it is clear that the ancient Egyptians used this form of torture against our ancestors as did many of our enemies throughout our history. But in no age is the assault against our minds as pronounced as in our own generation that awaits the coming of Moshiach. And the abuse does not necessarily come from our external enemies; it can come from within.

Attack on the Way We Think

To prevent us from getting out of exile, the yetzer hara – the negative impulse that G-d implanted within all of us to counter the positive influence of the yetzer tov-the impulse for good – attacks the way we think. In the words of the prophet: “they consider darkness to be light and light to be darkness.”

By warping our minds the forces of darkness enjoy a threefold advantage. A warped mind weakens the connection between our souls and bodies, thereby adversely affecting both our soul and body.

When we look around at the Jewish community and see the way so many of our brothers and sisters, even those in leadership positions, have warped notions of Judaism in general and our relationship with the Land of Israel in particular, we see the insidious effects of a distorted way of thinking.

Exile conditioning has affected the way we think of ourselves and our relationship with others. If our minds are tainted with delusional thoughts that the “Egyptians” are interested in paying us for our contribution to rebuild the cities of exile, or if we think we are getting “tax breaks” so that we feel comfortable living an “Egyptian” way of life, the shock in the end and the pain is even greater and the farther we are from being liberated.

As Jews we must remember that exile conditions, no matter how good – nay, especially when they are good – should never lull us into thinking that we can feel secure living a non-Jewish lifestyle in exile. The longer we delude ourselves that we are just like everyone else and we can prosper indefinitely living an exile rich life the more painful and destructive it is to our chances of being liberated.

Speak English but Think Jewish

The way to tackle the problem of our delusions is to learn how to think as Jews. To think as a Jew is to recognize that

we were chosen to live in exile not to identify with it and assimilate into it. On the contrary, our mission is to bring a higher form of awareness to the world around us; to be a “light unto the nations;” to spearhead the efforts to change the world, which many people identify as Tikkun Olam—repairing the world.

However, Tikkun Olam does not simply mean repairing the world, but as many Biblical expressions and our liturgy suggest it is: “to repair the world to accept the sovereignty of G-d.” Our mission is not simply to help the poor and downtrodden, but to give the world the wealth of our knowledge about G-d and the role He plays in our lives. Our mission is to prepare ourselves and the world for the Messianic Age, by spreading goodness and kindness permeated with the recognition of the one G-d.

How does one learn to think as a Jew? How do we ensure that our minds are receptive to our soul’s influence rather than the influence of the outside world?

The answer is simple. When we study Torah, which is G-d’s wisdom, it shapes and molds the way we think; to think through the prism of “G-d’s eyes.” Slowly but surely, our minds begin to discern what is light and what is darkness, and not confuse the two. Torah study is not simply an intellectual challenge. It is the means through which our mind stays free from alien influences and healthy, thereby

LIGHT FROM THE FUTURE – PARSHAS SHEMOS

preparing us for the imminent Redemption through Moshiach.

ESSAY EIGHT

HITTING BOTTOM

We are living in times that parallel the generation of the Exodus.

Many Jews have descended so low, in terms of their Jewish identities and affiliation, that we might think that their situation is hopeless.

Are we a hopeless bunch of people who are beyond rehabilitation and spiritual growth?

Or are we worthy and able to be liberated by a Moses-like leader, we call, Moshiach, who relates to the people , nurtures them and facilitates their liberation?

The answer is a resounding yes!

ESSAY EIGHT

HITTING BOTTOM

The Burning Bush

G-d's first revelation to Moses occurred through and at a burning bush.

To be sure, Moses was endowed with the spirit of G-d from the time he matured and left the comfort of the palace to see the way his brethren were suffering. As Maimonides in his Guide for the perplexed explains, it was the spirit of G-d within him that did not let him rest, upon realizing what was happening to his fellow Israelites. It was this spirit of G-d that motivated him to defend a Jewish slave.

Nevertheless, the first real **direct** communication G-d had with Moses came years later when he was in *Midian* tending a flock of sheep.

Why did G-d wait until Moses had fled Egypt, lived in Midian for many years, before He would initiate the dialogue with Moses about the exodus of the Jewish people?

Second, why did G-d choose to use a burning bush through which to make His first communication to Moses, the first leader of the Jewish people and their liberator?

Rashi explains that the choice of a *sneh*, a thorn bush, was to indicate that G-d empathized with their suffering. He too, was confined to a rather lowly thorn bush.

Why was the Miracle Necessary?

The question still begs itself, why did G-d have to make the bush burn and not be consumed? This “Chanukah-like” miracle was completely unnecessary. When G-d communicated with the Patriarchs, He did not employ a mechanism that altered the natural order of things. Why did Moses have to be exposed to G-d’s prophetic energy through this specific supernatural phenomenon?

When G-d revealed Himself to Moses to ask him to be their liberator, He knew that Moses would demur. Moses, in fact, stated that he did not believe the Israelites were deserving of being redeemed. After all, the very reason Moses had to flee Egypt was the existence of informers who were prepared to report him to Pharaoh, as Rashi explains in this week’s *parsha*. What had changed, Moses argued, to justify their liberation? And if G-d wanted to take them out anyhow, why did He need Moses?

Moses selection by G-d to liberate the Jews from Egypt was motivated by the desire to have Moses serve as their mentor and guide. Moses was to uplift them and prepare them so that they would be worthy of being liberated. In addition, Moses' inspiration and guidance was needed to help them cope with their new status as free people, something a slave oriented society finds it hard to achieve on its own.

Moses was therefore skeptical. How can I liberate them? They are not worthy and not ready. Therefore, Moses argued, why can't G-d liberate them Himself? What role could he Moses, a mere mortal, possibly serve?

The Jews Were Ready

In anticipation of Moses objections, G-d waited all these years because the Jewish people had just then reached their lowest point. Their suffering had so crushed them, that they were now ready to be liberated and nurtured in the same manner as an addict might have to reach rock bottom before he or she will be receptive to help.

How did G-d demonstrate that the Jewish people were ready? By revealing Himself in a lowly thorn bush, G-d was trying to show Moses that the Jewish people, on the one hand, had descended to the very nadir of their existence as slaves. They were as lowly as a thorn-bush. .

On the other hand, by showing Moses, that the flame did not extinguish, G-d intended to show Moses, that the souls of the Jewish people cannot possibly be extinguished. No matter how low they might have fallen, they were still in possession of a fiery spirit that will never burn out!

G-d was, in effect, telling Moses and us: “Don’t ever underestimate the power of a Jewish person to bounce back!” The resiliency of the Jewish nation is arguably one of the greatest miracles of existence.

“Therefore,” G-d exhorted Moses, “now is the most opportune time to reach ‘in,’ into the Jewish heart and soul, and fan its flame so that it is not only deserving to be liberated, but is ready as well.”

Parallels to Today

We are living in times that in many ways parallel the generation of the Exodus. Many Jews have descended so low, in terms of their Jewish identities and affiliation, that we might think that their situation is hopeless. If G-d wants to liberate them in spite of their unworthiness, He certainly can.

The question is, are we a hopeless bunch of people who are beyond rehabilitation and spiritual growth? Or, in spite of how low we might have fallen, are we worthy and able to

be liberated by a Moses-like leader, we call, Moshiach, who relates to the people , nurtures them and facilitates their liberation?

The answer is a resounding yes!

Moses, the “first redeemer,” was told that even the lowliest Jew—the thorn-bush Jew—has an eternal flame burning in him or her, and is worthy and ready to be uplifted. Our generation has also been told by our spiritual leaders, particularly the Lubavitcher Rebbe, that there is **no** Jew that is unworthy of being liberated. Moshiach’s task of uplifting every Jew so that he or she is liberated will be realized when all of us, serve as his emissaries to appreciate and nurture the eternal flame of every Jew. This would certainly hasten the process of the Redemption that we have been waiting for, for close to 2,000 years.

ESSAY NINE

NO DENIAL IN THE NILE

Dealing with the pain and suffering of others is a most difficult matter.

Many grown people develop a coping mechanism, whereby they desensitize themselves to the pain of others or they are in denial that such suffering is real.

This coping mechanism, while it might be necessary to prevent one from falling into a paralyzing depression, can also generate a very dangerous sense of indifference and cold-blooded insensitivity.

ESSAY NINE

NO DENIAL IN THE NILE

Moses More Mature than His Age

When Pharaoh decreed that all the Jewish boys shall be thrown into the water, Moses' mother had Moses placed in the Nile River. Batya, Pharaoh's daughter discovered the little basket. When she opened the basket, the Torah describes:

“She saw the child and behold it was youth crying and she had pity on him and she said, 'this is from the Hebrew children.'”

Rashi, citing the Talmud, takes note of the apparent discrepancy in Batya's description of Moses. On the one hand she sees a child, but his voice is that of a youth, indicating a much older person found and not a little baby.

While it is obvious that the Torah wishes to teach us that Moses was more mature than his age, why is it expressed by the sound of his voice?

One more question arises when we look at the end of the verse. Batya says, “This is of (or: from) the Hebrew

children.” It would have made more sense to have written, “This is a Hebrew child.” Why does it say, “This is from the Hebrew children?”

Crying for the Pain of Others

Rabbi Meir Shapiro, one of the pre-Holocaust Jewish leaders, founder of the famed Lubliner Yeshivah, member of the Polish Parliament, once offered the following beautiful explanation.

How do we distinguish between the crying of a baby and that of a more mature individual? A baby cries for its own pain and need. A mature person cries when someone else is hurting as well. A baby who cries usually needs a comforting embrace by his mother, or some other soothing and nurturing action to get it to stop crying. A mature person, who cries because of the pain of others, will not be comforted by a warm caress.

When Batya opened the little basket she noticed a little baby crying. Her first reaction would be to pick the baby up and hold it in a tight embrace. Yet, despite her best efforts at trying to comfort the little child, Moses continued to cry.

Batya was dumbfounded. She never saw a child that persisted in crying even after being held. It was not the

self-centered cry of a child, Batya reasoned. This child is a youth. True, he cries the same way any baby would cry, but yet it seems that it was not its own comfort and need that caused Moses to cry. It is the suffering of others that troubles his infant.

Batya therefore exclaims: “This is from the Hebrew children.” She did not mean to say that Moses was a Hebrew child. She meant to say that his crying was from the Hebrew children. Moses was crying because he had a intuitive sense of pain and anguish for the suffering of his fellow babies who were not as fortunate as he was to be saved by the daughter of the wicked Pharaoh.

Moses could not be comforted with the knowledge of his own salvation. From the day he was thrown into the Nile River, Moses was pained by the suffering of others.

Overriding Our Coping Mechanism

Dealing with the pain and suffering of others is a most difficult matter. Many grown people develop a coping mechanism, whereby they desensitize themselves to the pain of others or they are in denial that such suffering is real. This coping mechanism, while it might be necessary to prevent one from falling into a paralyzing depression, can also generate a very dangerous sense of indifference and cold-blooded insensitivity.

One of the most serious characteristics of the exile of Jews from their Land is the spiritual desensitization process that occurs in exile that enables us to cope with all the adversity exile brings in its wake.

The Torah tells us that the liberation of the Jewish people from their Egyptian bondage began not with Moses speaking to Pharaoh “Let my people go so that they may serve G-d,” rather it began when Moses cried uncontrollably because he could not bear the cries of the other children. This is the characteristic of Redemption and liberation.

While there was only one Moses, every Jew has an obligation to follow in his footsteps, by resisting the temptation to ignore the plight of others.

Crying and Pleading with G-d

In recent weeks and months, we have witnessed terrible tragedy in the Land of Israel and in this country at the hands of the most barbaric forces of terrorist inhumanity.

While we cannot fathom G-d’s ways and explain why these things happen, we must know how to react. First and foremost, we must feel empathy with all those who suffered. Our cry must be “**from** the Hebrew children” whose lives were lost and who lost their parents.

But this crying must be accompanied with heartfelt plea to G-d (that should accompany our increased actions of goodness and kindness):

“How much longer?!”

How much longer will we have to be in a world that is so violent and filled with hatred?

How much longer will the Jewish people be the targets of these haters and murderers?

When will the A-mighty bring Moshiach to take us out of geographic, emotional and spiritual exile and return us to our Holy Land, and usher in an age of universal peace and holiness. How much longer?!

ESSAY TEN

WERE YOU INVITED TO THE INAUGURATION?

The capacity to detach oneself from the exalted palace life, literally or figuratively, in order to see another's plight is the first criterion for a liberator.

The second criterion is to never look down at the person one goes out to.

And the third criterion is the ability to go into the other person's mind and heart, to totally and sincerely empathize with them.

Moses, our liberator and first leader acted this way towards every one of his brothers and sisters.

ESSAY TEN

WERE YOU INVITED TO THE INAUGURATION?

Moses' qualifications

Moses was the first leader of the Jewish people and according to tradition, “Moses will be the last redeemer,” meaning that Moshiach’s capacity to be a liberator derives from the spirit of Moses. This week’s *parsha*, *Shemos*, details the birth of Moses and his assumption of the position of leadership of the Jewish people.

One is entitled to ask, how was he selected for and inaugurated into this position? What qualified Moses to be the leader and liberator of the Jewish people?

When we peruse this week’s *parsha*, the answer to our question becomes apparent. No sooner does Moses have the capacity to leave Pharaoh’s palace where he was raised, he goes out to see his brothers and their pitiful plight. As the Torah relates: “Moses grew up and he went out to his brothers and saw their burdensome labors.” Upon closer analysis, the Torah seems to be telling us far more about Moses than is evident by just reading this verse casually.

There are three points that emerge from this verse:

First, it says “and he went out.” It could have simply stated, “And Moses grew up and he saw their burdensome labors.” Why the emphasis that he “went out?”

Second, it says that he went out “to his brothers.” It could have stated, “He went out and saw the Hebrews’ burdensome labors.” Why the emphasis that they were his brothers?

Third, it could have consolidated this verse by stating that “he went out and saw his brothers burdensome labors,” instead of “and he went out to his brothers” and then “he saw their burdensome labors.” Why does it place the words “his brothers” in the beginning of the verse in conjunction with his going out, rather than in conjunction with seeing their burdensome labor?

Going out

Upon closer scrutiny it is obvious that the Torah wishes to convey to us the unique character of Moses. As the Prince of Egypt, Moses could have just been casually going about surveying his country. Instead Moses goes **out**. Moses leaves the comfort, status and mindset of the palace and his role as the Prince of Egypt to connect to his brothers. Moses’ leaving was not just a physical movement away from his

home. It was a psychological and spiritual detachment from all that was precious to him, much like Abraham's leaving his land, birthplace and father's house. The only difference was that Abraham was commanded by G-d to do it; Moses did it on his own.

But even when one "goes out" of their secure state of being to relate to the needs of others, they do it because they sense the lowly state of others and therefore consent to condescend to help them. While they might force themselves to "go out" of their status to help, they quickly retreat back inside upon completing their mission of mercy.

His brother's empathetic keeper

Moses, however, did not view them simply as Hebrew slaves, the unfortunate victims of tyranny, and whose heart went out to them. He viewed them as his brothers, his equals. He went "out" of his place to enter **into** their space, but he did not go "down" to them. There was no condescension.

But even when a person goes out of his own space to relate to others, they can still see the other through the prism of their own experiences. Moses, the Torah relates, saw them "in their burdensome labor." Not only did he go out of his mindset but, moreover, he entered into their world and saw them within the context of **their** suffering." He entered into their minds and hearts to feel what they were feeling.

This capacity to detach oneself from the exalted palace life, literally or figuratively, in order to see another's plight, is the first criterion for a liberator. The second criterion is to never look down at the person one goes out to. And the third criterion is the ability to go into the other person's mind and heart, to totally and sincerely empathize with them. Moses acted this way towards every one of his brothers and sisters.

A spark of Moses and Moshiach in all of us

Rabbi *Schneur Zalman of Liadi*, the great Chassidic Master known as the *Alter Rebbe*—whose anniversary of his passing occurs on the 24th of *Tevet*, often coinciding with this week's *parsha*—states in his classic work, the *Tanya*, that every one of us possesses a spark of the soul of Moses. The *Ba'al Shem Tov* also said that each one of us has a spark of Moshiach. Notwithstanding the unparalleled greatness of Moses and Moshiach, every individual possesses the ability to emulate their ways by reaching out—not down—to everyone and then reaching in to everyone, helping them out of all that prevents them from being liberated.

Our Sages inform us that the generation of the Exodus will be reincarnated into the generation of the Redemption. It follows that all of us (inasmuch as we firmly believe that we are on the threshold of the final redemption) were “present” at the “inauguration” of Moses as the leader and liberator of

the Jewish people. By emulating these qualities, with which Moses and Moshiach were/are endowed, we will imminently cross over that threshold to witness the ultimate and imminent Redemption.

ESSAY ELEVEN

Y6K

Shabbos is the ultimate expression of freedom.

When a Jew liberates himself from work on the day that G-d sanctified, the individual experiences an unparalleled sense of freedom.

All the demands made on us from the outside world are suddenly removed.

We no longer feel subservient to our employer, the telephone, modern technology and all the concerns and anxieties that punctuate our workweek.

ESSAY ELEVEN

Y6K

Seeing and Seeing

Wen Moses first recognized the plight of his brothers and sisters in Egypt, the Torah relates,

“He **saw** their hard labor and he **saw** an Egyptian man strike a Hebrew man.”

The Torah does not repeat itself needlessly. That the Torah repeats the word “and he saw” dictates that there were two distinct forms of seeing. The second “and he saw” refers to the literal seeing of an Egyptian man striking a Hebrew man. However, the first mention of “and he **saw** their hard labor” refers to a more profound form of seeing. He reflected and contemplated about their slavery.

What precisely did Moses reflect on?

The Midrash explains that he reflected on the misery of the Jewish people and what he could do to help them. He then went to Pharaoh and said to him “Do you want the work they do to be complete? Grant them one day out of every seven days to rest on so that they can perform their work.”

The Midrash concludes that Pharaoh acceded to Moses' request. Thus when the precept of Shabbos observance was given to them in the desert at a place called Marah, after they were liberated from Egypt, the Torah states: Behold, G-d **gave** you the Sabbath." It does not say, "G-d is now giving you the Sabbath," but that He already gave it to them. This, the Midrash states, confirms that they had already been granted a respite from their work on the Shabbos in Egypt.

We can easily understand why Moses wanted the Jews to rest at least one day a week. Without some rest it would have been virtually impossible for them to survive their ordeal as slaves. What still needs to be clarified is why he chose the Sabbath? He could have selected any day of the week for them to rest on. After all, they did not yet have an obligation to observe the Sabbath.

The Two Dimensions of the Shabbos

The answer lies in a better understanding of the significance of the Shabbos. Shabbos is really a composite of two spiritual dynamics. One dimension of the Shabbos is the awareness that G-d is the true and only Creator. And although he has given us the right, and even the obligation, to be His partners in Creation six days a week, on the

seventh day, we rest to demonstrate our awareness that there is only one truly Creator.

This theme is reflected in the words that we recite in the *Kiddush* prayer with which we usher in the Shabbos that the Shabbos is “a remembrance of the act of Creation.” This is, in fact, the reason given for the observance of Shabbos in the Ten Commandments.

There is also a second dimension of Shabbos. In the same Kiddush prayer we also state that the Shabbos is a “remembrance of the Exodus from Egypt.” And, this theme is mentioned in the second version of the Ten Commandments in the book of Deuteronomy.

Shabbos is the ultimate expression of freedom. When a Jew liberates himself from work on the day that G-d sanctified, the individual experiences an unparalleled sense of freedom. All the demands made on us from the outside world are suddenly removed. We no longer feel subservient to our employer, the telephone, modern technology and all the concerns and anxieties that punctuate our workweek.

True, one can take any day off, but by doing so that rest is not in harmony with the internal dynamics of creation. The world that G-d created in six days continually generates a sense of the need to create. The universe pulsates with life and energy that begs to be harnessed. Resting then, while not forbidden, is not exhilarating and liberating because the

rest of nature is hard at work. Moreover, when one's actions or inaction is not in harmony with the inner dynamic of the universe, it will not be satisfying rest. One will always feel that they've been deprived of a crucial element of life.

True Freedom

Only on the Shabbos when G-d Himself imbued the entire cosmos with an inner state of rest and peace, does one's resting truly liberate oneself from all the demands and constraints of nature. Shabbos, therefore, is the day that we can dedicate to that which is above nature—the G-dly dimension of life. When one is so connected, one experiences true freedom, freedom from all the constraints of the world, freedom for the soul to experience that which it craves the most, an unhampered relationship with G-d.

We can now understand why Moses suggested that their day of rest should be on the Sabbath, not just any day of the week. Not only was he seeking to give them some respite from their backbreaking slave labor, but also he was attempting to provide them with the true taste of freedom. Bereft of this sense of freedom, they might have become so overwhelmed by their state of servitude, that they could not have ever been liberated and become a free people. To free ourselves from the shackles that enslave us, we must first

have an experience of a true inner peace and freedom that emanates from the freedom of the soul.

The Art of Wine-Tasting

Our sages have compared the six days of the week to the six millennia of history since the creation of Adam.

We are now poised on the threshold of the sixth millennia (yes, Y6K), the era when the entire world will experience true freedom. To be able to appreciate the experience of freedom, we were given a taste of it even now. Every time we observe the Shabbos, by desisting from work and by dedicating the day to an appreciation for the spiritual aspects of life, we hasten the process of Redemption and are afforded a taste of it now.

Much like the wine connoisseur who tastes his wine to know which wines will suit his palate, so too, we are given a taste of the Celestial Wines of Moshiach whenever we observe the Shabbos.

No wonder then, that we actually use wine to usher in the Shabbos. It is not only because wine induces joy and creates the right atmosphere for the Shabbos, but it is because it symbolizes the belief that we are getting a sampling of the true wine, that represents the “Secrets of the Torah” and of the universe that will be revealed in the Messianic Age.

With the world obsessed with Y2K, just a few years ago at the turn of the secular millennium—that occurred on Shabbos, our sample of Y6K—we as Jews should realize that to experience even one Shabbos is the most liberating and fulfilling experience. It was this experience that provided the Jews with their ability to survive the Egyptian exile, and it is the experience that will usher in the future Redemption.

ESSAY TWELVE

THE PRINCES OF EGYPT

The Rebbe has suggested that the Final Redemption will be ushered in by our dedication to the teachings of Maimonides—the second Moses—who has illuminated the world with the light of the entire Torah.

Moreover, more than any other Jewish scholar, Maimonides has taught us about—thereby preparing us for—the final Redemption.

ESSAY TWELVE

THE PRINCES OF EGYPT

“From Moses to Moses...”

“From Moses to Moses, none arose like Moses.”

This extraordinary praise forms the text of the epitaph etched on Moses Maimonides’ tombstone in his burial place in Tiberias. And it is fortuitous that the anniversary of Maimonides’ passing, his *Yahrtzeit*, on the 20th of *Tevet*, usually coincides with the reading of the *parsha* that introduces the first Moses.

What was it—besides the name they shared—that linked these two great Jewish leaders?

Upon deeper reflection it is apparent that they had much in common.

Firstly, both *Moshe Rabbeinu* (Hebrew for “Moses our teacher”—the title ascribed to the first Moses) and *Rabbeinu Moshe* (Hebrew for “Our teacher Moses”—the inverted title ascribed to Maimonides) were lawgivers. It was Moses who served as G-d’s agent to transmit the teachings of the Torah

to the Jewish people. Similarly, Maimonides was the foremost authority on Jewish law and was the author of the most authoritative and comprehensive code of Jewish law entitled “Mishneh Torah.”

The parallel is even more striking when one considers that no other scholar has succeeded in presenting all of Jewish law in one work as Maimonides did. In this regard Maimonides resembled his namesake in that Moses was the one who transmitted all of Torah knowledge to the Jewish people in the one book – the Torah.

It is interesting to note that all of Jewish law is based on and is represented by the 613 commandments. Indeed, Maimonides prefaces his Mishneh Torah with an enumeration of all the 613 commandments. This list is accompanied with the assertion that all of Judaism is based on them. It is thus remarkable that the numerical value (*Gematria*) of both Moses’ title “*Moshe Rabeinu*” and the inverted title applied to Maimonides “*Rabeinu Moshe*” is exactly 613!

Secondly, both “Moses” were not just lawgivers, but were also devoted leaders of their respective generations. Moses took the Jews out of Egyptian bondage and Maimonides took the Jews of his generation out of the spiritual darkness in which they were shrouded. Incidentally, Maimonides lived most of his life in Egypt.

Maimonides lived in a time and place that was permeated with obsessive rationalism and a preoccupation with Greek philosophy. People were utterly confused by the contradiction they saw that existed between Greek thought and Judaism. This theological dilemma threatened to undermine their adherence to the Jewish way of life. For this perplexed audience Maimonides wrote the Guide for the Perplexed (*Moreh Nevuchim*) that demonstrates that, to a large extent, there are no real contradictions between Greek thought and Torah, thus liberating his generation from a spiritual form of bondage.

“And she saw that he was Good”

Concerning the birth of Moses the Torah relates in this week’s parsha that “and she [Moses’ mother] saw that he was good.” Our sages provide us with two explanations as to what the Torah means that it was recognizable that Moses was good as soon as he was born. The first explanation is that when Moses was born the entire house was filled with light. The second explanation is that Moses was born circumcised.

Symbolically, this means that Moses was destined to illuminate the world with the light of Torah, but at the same time he would also remove the undesirable traits of the Jewish people through the process of the Exodus. This

removable of the negative is symbolized by the act of circumcision.

Maimonides, likewise, illuminated the world with his unprecedented presentation of the entire spectrum of Jewish knowledge, while simultaneously combating the alien influences of the dominant culture that threatened the Jewish community.

Was Maimonides the Messiah?

Our sages inform us that just as Moses was the first redeemer of the Jewish people, so too will Moses be the final redeemer of the Jewish people. This raises an obvious question. According to tradition, the final redeemer—Moshiach-Messiah—cannot be from the tribe of Levi but from the tribe of Judah. How then can Moses—a Levite—be the final redeemer?

One of the answers to this question is that it is the spirit of Moses that will imbue the Moshiach with his ability to liberate the Jews.

It may even be suggested that the final redemption will be ushered in by our dedication to the teachings of Maimonides—the second Moses—who has illuminated the world with the light of the entire Torah and whose leadership and teachings have enabled us to realize the age

concerning which it is written: “and I will circumcise the foreskin of their hearts.”

Moreover, more than any other Jewish scholar, Maimonides has taught us about—thereby preparing us for—the final Redemption. Virtually all works on Jewish law since the compilation of the Talmud have not included the laws concerning the future Era of Redemption, the Third Temple etc. Maimonides is a notable exception. Through his teachings, we will live to see the age when “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of G-d as the waters cover the sea” (a quote from the Book of Isaiah with which Maimonides concludes his *Mishneh Torah*).

ESSAY THIRTEEN

REACH OUT AND “TOUCH” SOMEONE

In Kabbalah we are taught that the bodily functions derive from their spiritual counterpart. Each part of our body is a reflection of G-d's attributes, that He uses to relate to His creation.

The most important and most dominant Divine attribute is kindness (chessed); G-d's way of reaching out.

Our hands, particularly, our right hand, parallels G-d's instrument for giving the world all of its needs.

To raise that hand against another is a gross perversion of G-d's power that was vested in us.

ESSAY THIRTEEN

REACH OUT AND “TOUCH” SOMEONE

Was Moses’ rebuke warranted?

Moses made his first venture outside of Pharaoh’s palace. What he sees troubles him deeply. An Egyptian Taskmaster is striking a Jewish slave. Moses quickly kills the Egyptian and disposes of him. The next day, Moses discovers something even more troubling than what he found the day before. He discovered two Jews fighting with one another.

How does Moses react to this bizarre scene of two Jews fighting, both themselves victims of terrible oppression and suffering?

In this week’s parsha the Torah relates that Moses rebuked them and said: “Wicked one (rasha), why do you hit your fellow?”

Our sages note that Moses applies the epithet rasha, a wicked person or evildoer, to the one who merely raised his hand to strike another. Despite the fact that he did not strike him in the end, Moses still considered this to be a

wicked act.

The question can be asked why did Moses exaggerate the crime of this Jew? How can someone who merely expresses a desire to hurt someone else be regarded as a rasha?

The answer lies in a better understanding of what the idea of “raising a hand” implies.

Misuse is as Bad as Abuse

A better definition of a hand (or any other part of the body) is an organ that was created with a G-d given purpose. The hand (and arm) is the G-d given instrument of giving. No matter how sweet one can talk to another, the person cannot do an act of kindness, without the arm and hand. Of course, one can awkwardly give some charity to another holding the money in his mouth and the like, but that is not the purpose for which the mouth was created. The mouth was created for saying words of Torah, prayer and other positive verbal expressions, and the hand was made to be used for helping others.

In Kabbalah we are taught that the bodily functions derive from their spiritual counterpart. This means that each part of our body is a reflection of G-d's attributes, G-d's “body” or “instruments” that He uses to relate to His creation.

Of all G-d's attribute, the most important and most

dominant one is His attribute of kindness (chessed). This attribute of G-d is responsible for the whole concept of creation, which is G-d's way of reaching out.

When G-d created the human body He designed it in a way that it should conform to His attributes. The reason for this is so that we can emulate G-d and thereby become G-dly in all of our ways.

Our hands, particularly, our right hand, is the parallel to G-d's instrument for giving the world all of its needs. It is the ultimate expression of Divine kindness. To raise that hand, the earthly embodiment of G-d's attribute of kindness, in a gesture that suggests hostility and the opposite of kindness is a gross perversion of G-d's power that was vested in us.

Thus, Moses was utterly shocked when he saw a Jew—a descendent of Abraham whose whole life was dedicated to kindness—so abuse his instrument of kindness and attempt to strike another Jew.

Raising a hand at another, thus, is evil, not only because it is the prelude to the act of striking and hurting someone, but because it is the ultimate misuse of an instrument given to us by our Creator and that which parallels our Creator's "hand" (attribute of kindness). While being abusive is certainly a crime, misusing one's faculties is a crime in its own right.

Worthy of Redemption

This would have troubled Moses anytime. But it was particularly troubling to Moses, because this was the time that the Jewish people needed special kindness and compassion from G-d. The Jewish people in Egypt had reached the physical abyss and degenerated to the nadir of spirituality. They needed, now more than ever before, a Divine helping hand to *shlep* them out of the quagmire they were in.

How can the Jewish people be worthy recipients of G-d's kindness, Moses wondered, when they were using their very instrument of kindness, their hands, for the very opposite of kindness?

There is an obvious lesson for our own day and age as we prepare ourselves to greet Moshiach and be ready for the ultimate Redemption.

Now, and particularly now, is the time that we have to “reach out” to touch someone who is in need of our assistance. Whether it is material help or spiritual support, our act of kindness elicits G-d's reciprocal gesture. When we act kindly, it is what causes Him to “outstretch His arm” and take us out of the confining aspects of our lives, as individuals and as a people. Now, more than ever we need to know what are our G-d given resources and faculties so that we use them properly.

This too is a form of liberation. When we condition ourselves to act in ways that contradicts G-d's purpose and intent, those faculties and talents are in deep trouble. They can be said to be in prison or in exile. To utilize all of our faculties properly is our way to bring about the perfecting and liberation of the entire Jewish people and indeed the entire world.

ESSAY FOURTEEN

STAND FAR AND CLOSE

We can compare our situation to reading a mystery novel.

Even if we read the first and last pages and know the outcome, we still have to read the book to discover how the events unfolded and lead to that climax.

We are now in middle of the novel, closer to the end to be sure, but we still are in the dark about the very last events that will lead to the ultimate conclusion.,

ESSAY FOURTEEN

STAND FAR AND CLOSE

“His Sister Stood from Afar”

Moses, the liberator of the Jewish nation from Egyptian bondage, was in mortal danger from the time he was born. Pharaoh ordered the Egyptians to throw all newborn Hebrew males into the Nile. When Moses was born his parents hid him for three months and then placed him in a basket to float to hoped-for safety on the Nile River.

The Torah relates that after Moses was placed in the Nile, Miriam, his “sister stood from afar, in order to know what would happen to him.”

The Talmud (*Sotah* 13a) comments that she wanted to know how her prophecy would materialize.

The prophecy, to which the Talmud is referring, was her prediction that her mother would bear a child who would save the Jewish people. The Talmud then relates:

When Moses was born the entire house was filled with light. Her father arose and kissed her on her

head and said to her, “My daughter, your prophecy has been fulfilled!”

However, when he was cast into the river, her father arose and hit her on her head and said to her, “my daughter, where is your prophecy?”

This is what the Torah means when it says that “she stood from afar, in order to know what would happen to him,” [which means] she wanted to know how her prophecy would materialize in the end.”

The Talmudic Sages knew that Miriam was not curious about whether or not Moses would be saved. She was a prophetess and knew with certainty that Moses would survive to become the liberator of the Jewish people. This was never a question for her.

If that is the case, the early Chassidic master Rabbi Nochum of Chernobyl, in his work *M’eor Einayim*, asks why did she wait there on the banks of the Nile if she was so confident in the outcome?

To answer this question, it may be suggested, and the Talmud explains, that although she knew with certainty that Moses would survive, Miriam did not know the logistics of precisely how and in what manner his salvation would take place.

Now Miriam, in her confidence, could have stayed home and concerned herself with other matters, knowing that everything would work out fine. However, Miriam was anxious to see it happen and also do her part in making the process unfold.

Redemption's Imminence: Prophecy

There is a beautiful lesson here for our own day and age.

The Rebbe informed us in a prophetic message that we are living in Messianic times and that the Final Redemption is imminent. Since the Rebbe revealed that powerful message to us, many dramatic changes—often positive—have occurred, but the final, true and complete Redemption has yet to have materialized. This limbo situation, as we stand on the threshold that separates exile and Redemption, can be unnerving and engender disillusionment.

To answer this challenge we must consider Miriam. She prophesied about Moses, the first redeemer; not only that he would be born but that he would eventually liberate the Jewish people. The fact that this was revealed to her prophetically means that it was sure to happen. A prophecy for something positive must materialize; it cannot be reversed, as opposed to a negative prophecy that can be reversed if the people repent.

Miriam thus was certain of the eventual outcome. Like her, we too must be confident and certain that the Rebbe's vision will come to fruition. We just don't know how the process will unfold. We therefore have to stand on the banks of our own Nile and watch for how it will happen.

We can compare our situation to reading a mystery novel. Even if we read the first and last pages and know the outcome, we still have to read the book to discover how the events unfolded and lead to that climax. We are now in middle of the novel, closer to the end to be sure, but we still are in the dark about the very last events that will lead to the ultimate conclusion.,

Don't Stay Home!

As we have seen, Miriam, notwithstanding her faith in a positive outcome, did not stay home but got directly involved in the salvation of Moses. First as she waited to see how he would be saved and later by arranging for her mother to nurse the baby.

The lesson for us who are confident that the Redemption is imminent is do not "stay home," We must show our yearning and eager anticipation for the process and also be direct participants in it. To be sure, whether or not we are a part of the process that leads to Redemption, it will happen. But we want the Redemption to come because of

us and not in spite of us. To that end, we must get involved in doing redemptive things in a redemptive manner by seizing every opportunity to make our world an extension of the Holy Land and by welcoming and internalizing Moshiach.

Standing Afar

Commentators ask why the Torah states that Miriam stood and watched from afar? Some Sages have offered the explanation that she was afraid to stand too close lest she be spotted. But why was she afraid of that? Why would the Egyptians harm her just because she was standing near the Nile?

Another question can be raised, and that is why the Torah doesn't mention her by name? All it says is that she was Moses' sister.

Using Midrashic license, we may take the reference to "sister" and interpret it allegorically, as is done in the Talmud and Midrash, as a metaphor for wisdom, as it says, "Say unto wisdom, 'you are my sister'" (*Mishlei* 7:4).

The Paradox

With this additional bit of information the verse can be rendered: "And **wisdom** stood from afar, in order to know what would happen to him." Here wisdom is, paradoxically,

standing afar but engaged in knowing! Wisdom is both elusive and accessible. How do we explain that paradox?

Wisdom is an indispensable part of Judaism but it has its limitations. King Solomon, when attempting to understand the deeper meaning of the Red Heifer ritual for the purification of one who came in contact with the dead, exclaimed: “I said, ‘I will get wisdom; but it was far from me.” (Koheles 7:23)

King Solomon, the wisest of all people, knew that there were things which eluded him.

In all probability Moses should have perished in the Nile, the very body of water where all the other newborn male children were drowned. Miriam, with all her wisdom, could not fathom why Moses was in the Nile and how he would emerge unscathed. She just knew that it would happen. If she had allowed her wisdom to analyze every aspect of this process it would have demoralized her. She therefore had to place the “sister-wisdom” component of her being in the background and witness events from afar, even as she was certain that her prophecy was accurate.

However, while she stood afar, which we now know symbolizes that she tentatively suspended her understanding, she did not suppress her intellect and understanding. The term “afar” here implies that while she had to temporarily defer her intellectual grasp of the

situation until the events would unfold to make sense of them, she did try to understand the events as they happened.

This too instructs us how we should apply our understanding to the Messianic process. While we must recognize the limits of our understanding and the trans-rational nature of Moshiach and Redemption, we must not ignore our minds. Whatever aspects of Redemption that we can understand we must make the effort to understand.

The only limits we must place on our understanding are:

- a) A humble recognition that we cannot possibly fathom every aspect of the Messianic process. Logic itself concedes that there are things that transcend logic and intellect.
- b) We must be patient even with those aspects of the process that we can understand; we must wait to see how the events unfold.

As they unfold, much of what we previously could not understand will become comprehensible to us.

Wait and Act

But as we stand from afar and suspend our logic (“His sister [wisdom] stood from afar”), we must always be watching for the events to unfold and appreciate their place in the Messianic drama.

As we wait for Moshiach, we must see all of the world's recent events, many of which have taken us by surprise, as elements of Moshiach's impact on the world in preparation for the Final Redemption.

But that is not enough. As soon as we see an opportunity to be part of the process we must jump into action, just as Miriam did. When Pharaoh's daughter saved Moses and was looking for a woman to nurse him, Miriam seized the opportunity and brought her own mother to nurse her child, who just minutes earlier had been saved from an almost certain death.

What was unclear to her before as to how the prophecy would unfold now became crystal clear. Moses not only survived his ordeal but he would be nursed by his own mother and raised in privilege by Pharaoh's daughter in her father's palace.

Moses would have the best of both worlds. He would be nurtured by his mother, a holy woman, who would plant the seeds of holiness and dedication to his brethren in him. He would also enjoy the benefit of being raised in Pharaoh's place as an Egyptian Prince, providing him an excellent opportunity to use his exalted power to help his brethren and even redeem them.

While Miriam still did not know how matters would conclude, many pieces of the puzzle were now coming together.

The wisdom and understanding of the events that were afar have now become near.

Similarly, as time progresses we can see and understand some of the events that point to the imminence of the Redemption, even as certain aspects remain elusive and beyond our comprehension.

In truth, this is precisely the Moshiach dynamic: to fuse the trans-rational and the rational.

ESSAY FIFTEEN

HIJACKED!

Pharaoh's diabolical plan was to enlist women to serve as agents in continuing and deepening the exile.

Redemption is the power to rebel against any and every power that tells us what to do. It is an inner fortitude that is impervious to all outside influences.

Pharaoh therefore enlisted the two most defiant individuals he could find, the women whose lives were dedicated to bringing more Jewish life into the world and whose very nature and profession were all about liberation.

Women power prevailed!

ESSAY FIFTEEN

HIJACKED!

Pharaoh and the Midwives

Pharaoh saw the incredible growth of the Jewish people in Egypt and conspired to reduce their numbers. His first strategy was to oppress them with back-breaking, slave labor. When that did not stunt their explosive growth he went to plan B. The Torah, in this week's parsha, then recounts how he attempted to get the Hebrew midwives to kill the newly born males. The two midwives—Shifrah and Puah—defied Pharaoh and let the targeted babies live.

This story is replete with anomalies.

First, why did Pharaoh choose to murder only the male children? If his goal was to enslave the Jewish people he would have fared better to kill the females, which would prevent further births, and compel the males to become his slaves.

Second, even should Pharaoh have spared the girls, this would not have guaranteed the reduction of the population. All of the newborn females could have

conceived from the multitude of boys and men who were already born. If he would have eliminated the female population it would have had a greater effect on reducing the population.

Third, why did Pharaoh ask the Hebrew midwives to murder the Jewish babies? He could have sent in his own soldiers to carry out his bidding, which, indeed, he eventually resorted to when he decreed that all the male children be thrown into the Nile.

Fourth, when the Torah introduces the story of Pharaoh and the Hebrew midwives it repeats the words “he said”: “The king of Egypt said to the Hebrew midwives, one who was named Shifrah, and the second, who was named Puah. He said, ‘When you help the Hebrew women give birth, and you look on the birth stool, if it is a son, you shall put him to death, but if it is a daughter, she may live.’”

Fifth, according to our Oral tradition—which was subsequently recorded in the Talmud, and later cited by Rashi—these two midwives, Shifrah and Puah, were actually Yocheved and Miriam, Moses’ mother and sister, respectively. Why does the Torah go out of its way to emphasize these “nicknames” rather than to state their real names?

Sixth, as Ibn Ezra asks, surely there must have been more than two Hebrew midwives to serve all the Jewish women? Why then did he only summon only these two?

The Model for Future Redemption

To answer all these questions it must be borne in mind that the Egyptian bondage and the Exodus are recounted to help us deal with our own exile situation and to teach us the dynamics of exile and Redemption.

Pharaoh, the physical monarch, also represents the power vested in exile which does everything in its power to keep us ensconced in this exile mindset. To keep us in the exile mode, Pharaohs of our history initially believed persecution would suffice. Distract us from our spiritual pursuits by forcing us to think about our survival. Dampen our spirits by making life difficult.

In the modern context this approach is referred to as the “turbulent waters” which threaten to engulf us and extinguish our passion for G-d and for our need to extricate ourselves from exile.

Flourishing in Exile

This approach failed miserably. Despite all of his efforts to subjugate the Jewish people and thereby decrease their

numbers and their prospects to ever emerge from Egypt Pharaoh realized that these people have an uncanny ability to flourish in times of persecution. The more they are oppressed the more they can elicit hidden powers that enable them to survive and even thrive.

In the modern day context, the distractions that come from our need to survive economically are not enough to crush us. In the words of King Solomon, as explained in Chassidic thought, “The turbulent waters cannot extinguish the love.” On the contrary, these pressures elicit even deeper soul powers and passion for G-d which empower us to endure and to grow.

When Pharaoh sees that we can flourish in exile, empowering us to exercise control over exile and then subsequently break out of its mold, he has to come up with a new and “creative” idea to strengthen the grip of exile over us.

Pharaoh’s mind finally recognizes that there must be some external force that assists us in persevering and flourishing. If he could tap into this force and harness it for his own nefarious objectives he would finally succeed in aborting the nascent process of Redemption.

Enlisting the Power of Redemption to Keep us in Exile!

Pharaoh's ingenious and diabolical plan thus was to enlist the power of Redemption itself as an agent in continuing and deepening the exile.

What is the power of Redemption and where is it vested? Redemption is the power to resist. Redemption is the power to rebel against any and every power that tells us what to do. It is not so much the form of rebellion where one demonstrates in public but rather an inner fortitude that is impervious to all outside influences. So why not employ the rebellious spirit in the cause of staying in exile?

Pharaoh therefore enlisted the two most defiant individuals he could find, the women whose lives were dedicated to bringing more Jewish life into the world and whose very nature and profession were all about liberation.

Pharaoh, therefore, chose midwives to carry out his plan because women in general, and midwives in particular, are associated with the power of Redemption.

The Power of Women

In Kabbalah and Chassidic thought we are told that women in general are more in tune with Redemption and less affected by the outside world. The Talmud states, "Women are endowed with greater *binah*/understanding than men."

The Divine attribute of *binah* is referred to in Kabbalah as “the world of freedom.” The Talmud explicitly attributes the exodus from Egypt to the merit and power of women. And the future Redemption, in particular, is deemed as the age in which the spiritual feminine characteristics will dominate.

But midwives in particular personify the idea of Redemption. The prophet Yechezkel describes the Exodus from Egypt as the birth of the Jewish nation. Our suffering in the last years of exile are said to be the “birth pangs” of Moshiach.

A midwife therefore symbolizes the liberating power of emerging out of exile into the world of freedom. This idea is buttressed by the statement in the Talmud suggesting that Moshiach’s coming is dependent on the birth of all the souls that are destined to be born. Thus, the literal birth of a child is the physical medium through which the spiritual power of birth is channeled.

Of all the midwives whom he could have chosen Pharaoh selected the two who personified the qualities of transcending exile conditions more than any other. Shifrah and Puah, as stated, were actually Yocheved and Miriam. Yocheved was born as they entered into Egypt. She was the link between the world of freedom and the world of exile. She had the power to synthesize the two so that even in

exile one is able to transcend it. Miriam, on the other hand, was a product of exile conditions; her very name means bitterness because she emerged at the time the bondage reached its harshest and lowest point. But despite these bitter conditions she was the prophetess who predicted the birth of Moses, the liberator of the Jews from bondage.

Pharaoh therefore cunningly asked the two most prominent and exile-defiant women, ironically, to use their power to abort the entire process of Redemption!

What more clever tactic could anyone have contrived? What more effective way then to strengthen the exile than by enlisting the most powerful forces of liberation in the cause of keeping the Jews in exile?

Pharaoh therefore asked to spare the women. He specifically wanted to keep the women (read: the forces of birth and liberation) alive to re-educate them to rebel against any emerging spirit of defiance. Rather than try to suppress the dynamic of liberation by taking it on directly, he would “hijack” it and direct it to destroy its own power.

Enlisting Shifrah and Puah

This explains why the Torah uses the names of Shifra and Puah; these names reflect these midwives’ incredible life-sustaining powers which Pharaoh sought to enlist in his

plan. Shifrah, our Sages tell us, was so named because she would beautify the children at birth and Puah refers to her talent to soothe the children when they cried. These two traits are the two most exile negating traits. Beauty, in Kabbalah teaching is the power of synthesis; it represents the dynamic of Redemption which blends the highest spiritual forces within the lowest realms of existence. And soothing the child refers to the power of women to take away the pain of exile.

But Pharaoh failed in this regard as well because, as the midwives told him, “the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are skilled as midwives. Before the midwife comes to them, they have already given birth.”

The question arises, if the Hebrew women gave birth before the midwives came, why was there a need for the midwives at all?

Obviously the midwives’ role was to assist in the birth process and to help the mother and baby after the birth, but the actual birth did not require the midwife’s expertise.

Every Jew(ish Woman) a Midwife

On the spiritual plane, the midwives’ response to Pharaoh was to refute his premise that Jewish resiliency and spiritual creativity emanated from an external source. In

fact, the Hebrew women have an **innate** spiritual force that enables them to rise above the exile constraints and to bring a newborn into the world. The midwives are our spiritual mentors who assist us in recognizing our own potential. They might even be needed to assist in the birthing process. In addition, the spiritual midwives bring more beauty to our spirituality (Shifrah) and comfort us with soothing words when exile conditions depress and discourage us (Puah). But when push comes to shove, it is the unique, innate G-dly energy that all Jewish women possess, in greater measure than men, which empowers them to release themselves and all of us out of exile.

The Lessons

One of the lessons from the above is that there is a Pharaoh mentality that threatens to undermine the process of Redemption that we are now in.

A second lesson is that when this Pharaoh discovers he cannot beat us with the conventional method of distraction through oppression and anxiety associated with surviving he will attempt to get us to use our own natural resistance to exile and our rebellious spirit (our spiritual midwives) to abort the process of Redemption.

This undermining dynamic can manifest itself by using Moshiach as a way to draw a wedge between one Jew and

another. Moshiach is all about the unification of the Jewish people. We may have a solid belief in the imminence of the Redemption and be involved in efforts towards this end. But at the same time we may take these commendable traits to justify looking condescendingly at others who have not yet joined in this effort or who may have other ideas, right or wrong, to achieve our goal. This is Pharaoh's attempt at using the midwives to abort the very process of Redemption.

Alternatively there are some whose level of Judaism is compromised because they feel incorrectly that the Messianic Age will no longer require Mitzvah observance. This mindset effectively takes the very force of liberation and places it in shackles. Moshiach itself then becomes a hostage to the forces of exile.

A third lesson is that every Jew, and particularly the women, is innately involved with the process of "birth" and of bringing Moshiach. Moshiach is not a foreign influence; it is an integral part of our consciousness that just needs to be awakened and cultivated properly.

A fourth lesson is that despite our natural desire for Moshiach, we do depend on the spiritual "midwives" or mentors, those whom the Rebbe directed all of us to follow. These mentors enhance our preparations for the Redemption and provide us with comfort and succor when

the burdens of exile bear heavily on us—the Shifrahs and Puahs of the world.

ESSAY SIXTEEN

WHOSE WHO IN EXILE?

In these times of freedom and prosperity we can comfortably say: “You have satisfied us with Your goodness”!

So now we can truly appreciate the second part of the prayer: “Gladden our hearts with Your salvation.”

G-d for Your own sake bring Moshiach and an end to exile in all of its incarnations and manifestations!

ESSAY SIXTEEN

WHOSE WHO IN EXILE?

Moses Chosen at Burning Bush

This week's parsha introduces us to Moses the "first redeemer" of the Jewish people. Moses serves as the paradigm for the final redeemer of the Jewish people—Moshiach.

Moses' selection as the redeemer occurs at the scene of the "burning bush," which the Torah identifies as a thorn-bush.

Rashi, the principal Torah commentator—whose purpose is to provide us with the most basic level of understanding of the Biblical text—explains that G-d's choice of the thorn-bush as His venue of communication to Moses was to express His empathy for the plight of the oppressed Jewish people. Rashi applies the verse from Psalms to this situation: "I am with him in distress." This is to say that when we are in distress, G-d, as it were, also experiences "pain" and "anguish."

Why, we may ask, was it important for G-d to express His pain to Moses? Wasn't it enough for Moses to know the pain of his brethren? If Moses was insensitive to the plight of the Jewish people would he be sensitive to the more abstract notion of Divine suffering?

Two Scenarios or Reasons for the Need, and our Desire, for Moshiach.

One explanation can be offered in light of a commentary given by the Lubavitcher Rebbe to one of our Sabbath prayers:

“Satisfy us with your goodness, and gladden our souls with your salvation.”

The Rebbe explained that there are two scenarios or reasons for the need, and our desire, for Moshiach:

The first is for Moshiach to end all of the misery and pain we suffer in exile.

The second reason is to liberate G-d Himself from exile.

The phenomenon of G-d being in exile with us the Talmud and Zohar refer to as, “*shechinta b’galusa*.” This implies that even if all of the suffering of the Jewish people—and, indeed, the entire world—would cease; even if universal peace and prosperity would prevail, we would still need Moshiach to “liberate” G-d from His state of exile.

And thus the Sabbath prayer is reinterpreted by the Rebbe: “Satisfy us with Your goodness” – Get rid of all the suffering and pain, so that our souls will be gladdened with Your salvation; that you G-d will also be liberated!

Analogy from Our Relationships

To better understand the Rebbe’s interpretation of the foregoing prayer it is important that we define the concept of “*shechinta b’galusa*.” What exactly does it mean for G-d to be in exile?

To translate this concept into down-to-earth human terms a simple analogy from our own relationships can be helpful:

If you are standing next to another person and addressing him or her, while that person totally ignores you, and does not even acknowledge your presence—that would be an incredible insult and downright painful. It demonstrates that a huge gap exists between the two of you, notwithstanding that individual’s close physical proximity to you.

The insult and the concomitant emotional pain are magnified when the one ignoring you is/was your friend or relative. The pain increases when you realize how much you did for that individual. The worst case scenario would

be for a parent—who gave his or her life and limb for their child—to receive the silent treatment from their offspring.

True reality taking a back seat to the illusory view of reality.

That is precisely what happens in our world.

We live in a world, whose very existence depends on G-d creating and sustaining it continuously. Yet, we do not appreciate G-d's role in our lives, or worse, we ignore His role. This is the equivalent of being shunned by our own children, loved ones and friends. And this is the definition of G-d being in exile.

The root of the problem is that we view the world or nature as an independent entity rather than a manifestation of G-d's creative energy. G-d can then be said to be in exile because exile is defined as being cast away from your home. When G-d does not enter our consciousness He has, for all intents and purposes, been alienated from our world.

Certainly, when we see a world in which injustice prevails, where the righteous suffer and the wicked prosper, and where people can even deny G-d's existence, G-d is in exile.

If we had to give one definition of what it means for G-d to be in exile—in all of its forms—it would be defined thus:

G-d—the essence of truth and reality—is in exile anytime true reality takes a back seat to the illusory view of reality,.

In the first scenario of exile, G-d is obscured because of the suffering; in the second scenario, G-d is concealed because we view the world with tinted and tainted spectacles.

Thus, the Rebbe explains, we pray to G-d, “Satisfy us with our needs from Your goodness.” Remove the exile conditions by giving us everything we need. When that happens, our pleas for Moshiach and Redemption will rise to a higher and more sophisticated level. Our desire for Moshiach will not be predicated on the need to escape suffering, but will be for **G-d’s** sake. Hence, the second part of the prayer: “And gladden our hearts from **Your** salvation.” The words, “your salvation”, the Rebbe reinterprets, refer to **G-d’s** own salvation. Our joy will come from the realization that G-d is no longer in exile and true reality becomes the reality we will know and feel.

With this introduction we can understand why G-d wanted Moses to know that He too was in distress. Although the primary reason for Moses’ selection as Israel’s redeemer was to liberate them from Egyptian bondage, the A-mighty wanted to tell Moses that underlying that rationale for his role as redeemer was a deeper dimension. G-d too was in exile, for the fact that there can be pain and suffering in this world is an expression of G-d’s concealed state. If G-d’s

glory were to be fully manifested in this physical world, pain and suffering, evil and cruelty would cease.

At the time of the Exodus, the focus was on relieving the physical suffering. However, at the same time, the process for removing the “veil” that allows for pain, suffering and injustice to exist in the first place was being set into motion.

First, G-d appears to Moses in the burning thorn-bush as a symbol of G-d’s empathetic pain. The secret to remove the physical manifestations of exile is to recognize that there is also a spiritual dimension to exile. And we must focus our energies on dealing with the removal of that level.

Second, G-d also reveals to Moses the key to removing the spiritual form of exile.

G-d says to Moses:

“When you take the people out of Egypt, you will worship G-d on this mountain.”

This, of course, refers to the ultimate giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai, the purpose of which was to reveal G-dliness to the world, which will pave the way for the ultimate Redemption. Equipped with the knowledge of Torah and the implementation of its dictates in our daily lives we remove—layer by layer—all that obstructs the clear view of G-dly reality.

We are living in historic times. Never before have the Jewish people been so free and prosperous. This does not mean that there are no serious problems, but relative to the rest of our history, we are living in unprecedented good times.

It is in precisely these times when we can comfortably say: “You have satisfied us with Your goodness”! So now we can truly appreciate the second part of the prayer: “Gladden our hearts with **Your** salvation.”

G-d for Your own sake bring Moshiach and an end to exile in all of its incarnations and manifestations!

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTER

The lesson for us here in the last generation of Galus and first generation of Geulah-Redemption is that we must bury the exile constraints in the sand, i.e., recognize that Torah, unlike other disciplines, is not a “man.”

Torah is Divine.

When we internalize and live by the Moses-model of humility we can access that Divinity, which enables us to break out of all the constraints of Exile, with the imminent Redemption through Moshiach.

ESSAY SEVENTEEN

LEFT, RIGHT AND CENTER

Moses' Qualities

The first Jewish leader, Moses, was raised in Pharaoh's palace. When he grew up and went out of the palace to see how his brethren were faring, he witnessed an Egyptian taskmaster beating a Jewish slave. The Torah describes Moses' reaction thus: "He turned this way and that way, and he saw that no man was there so he struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand."

This was a life-changing event for Moses. The Torah uses it to signify that Moses is a man of action and a leader. It follows then that every detail in this brief narrative can provide us with information about Moses, his personality and his leadership.

If we had to describe Moses' most salient qualities, they could be summed up as follows:

(a) Moses was the liberator, leader of and provider for the Jewish people. He is often referred to as "*Go'el Rishon*-the First Redeemer" and "*Raya Mehemna*-The Faithful Shepherd."

(b) Moses was the one through whom G-d gave us the Torah. He is thus called Moshe Rabeinu-Moses our Teacher.

(d) Moses was the ultimate prophet. In the Torah, G-d declares that no one else has ever arisen with prophetic abilities comparable to those of Moses.

It stands to reason that we should be able to find all of these qualities in the Egyptian Taskmaster narrative. Let us now analyze Moses' response to the beating of his brother.

Moses the Liberator, Shepherd and Prophet

Moses liberates the Jew from the murderous hands of the Egyptian Taskmaster. In so doing, he demonstrates the lengths he will go to save his fellow Jew and care for his needs. Indeed, as a first step, Moses leaves the comfort and privilege of the palace to see how his brethren are doing. It is only then that he sees the beating of the Jew. That moment shatters and then utterly transforms his self-perception. In a flash of G-d inspired insight, this member of the privileged Egyptian elite recognizes a profound truth: he is brother to the Jewish slave and has a duty to save him from the taskmaster. This demonstrates the degree to which Moses shows concern for his flock.

We also can see Moses acting here as a prophet of astonishing power. Rashi teaches us that the words “he saw that no man was there . . .” means that Moses saw that “no person is destined to descend from him that will convert [to Judaism].” He demonstrated his prophetic prowess even at that early stage of his life.

Where is Moses’ Role as Torah Giver?

The question, however, remains: where do we see hints of Moses’ role as the giver of the Torah in this story?

Rabbi Meir Shapiro, the legendary founder of the Chachmei Lublin Yeshivah in Pre-World War II Poland, explains this verse homiletically:

“He turned this way and that way” is interpreted to mean that he turned to the right and turned to the left and discovered that “there is no man here.” This refers to the two competing ideologies hotly debated in modern society. Some argue that the political right cares more for freedom and human dignity. Others contend that the left is more concerned with the common man and for the well-being of all humanity.

Moses, upon seeing the injustice being perpetrated against one of his brethren looks in both directions for guidance. Will the “right” show him how to address society’s ills and

bring freedom, fairness and justice? Or, perhaps, one must look to the “left” for governance and relief.

Moses searches in vain for a man-made ideology that can solve the problems of the world and bring salvation. He looks this way and that in vain and concludes that “there is no man.” There is no one else here who cares or who is capable of accomplishing anything positive. Moses then “buries” the Egyptian culture and ideology in the ground. Moses recognizes that secular culture is no more effective than the dust of the earth.

This is Moses’ connection to Torah. To appreciate the Torah’s uniqueness as a way of life one must understand the futility of all the other systems. Moses now recognized that constructing a perfect ideological system was beyond the powers of man.

The Admixture of Good in Secular Systems

Does this mean that there is no good in non-Torah ideologies? Is there no value in the democratic ideals and expansion of personal freedom that secular ideologies have contributed to society?

Indeed, there is much good in man-made systems. We must remain aware, however, that every good aspect of life always has, at least a tinge of adversity. Conversely, every

negative experience always has at least a tinge of positivity. In the words of the Alter Rebbe: “This admixture commenced after the sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, [when that] which had been formally totally separate, became mixed together. Nothing is pure any longer; there is no good without evil and vice-versa.”

Only the G-d given teachings of the Torah are pure and free from the intrusion of negative energy.

The Rebbe explains the phenomenon thus: “The laws and ethical precepts of Torah (those contained, for example, in the tractate Avos [Ethics of the Father] et al.) are the epitome of goodness and truth. All other systems of morality, however, which men by themselves have contrived, mix together good and evil, truth and falsehood.”

Where Does the Good in Other Systems Originate?

One may reasonably ask the question: from where does the positive energy within man-made institutions come?

The answer is simple: Torah. The Rebbe relates that his father-in-law (the Previous Rebbe) was once asked by advocates of competing political ideologies which of their philosophies the Torah agreed with. The Previous Rebbe’s response was: “The Torah, since it is the absolute

perfection of truth and goodness, contains within itself all of the best ideas which one may find in all ideologies.”

Which Direction is Torah

If the secular ideologies are characterized as “left” and “right,” how then are we to describe Torah?

The answer is that Torah is actually the center. But it is not the center as in “moderate” or “lukewarm,” rather it is the center as in “central,” that around which all else revolves. It is the center because it comprises both the right (*chesed*-kindness) and the left (*gevurah*-judgment) and synthesizes them. Torah, as the Rebbe stressed, is the epitome of truth. Truth is impartial to arguments from either of the directions. If truth dictates veering to one particular direction then so be it. If truth then demands that we make an about-turn and go in the opposite direction so be it! Truth is unlimited and inviolate and cannot be swayed by any other consideration. One of the 13 Principles of Faith, postulated by Maimonides, is that the Torah can never be changed; it is immutable.

Moses: Right and Left

One could understand his looking to the right and left on a non-spatial level, which establishes Moses' connection to Torah in a more direct manner.

When the Torah states that Moses looked in both directions, it did not mean that he was thinking about the Egyptian notion of right and left. He did not entertain the notion that Egyptian culture provided the answer to the moral dilemma of a Jew being beaten. Rather, he was already thinking of the Torah's notion of right and left. The Torah is compared to water in Biblical texts because water is life sustaining and an expression of *chesed*-kindness. Torah is also called fire because like fire it can destroy evil.

Moses surveyed the situation at hand. Here is a Jew, beaten mercilessly by the cruel Egyptian Taskmaster. Moses therefore took his inspiration from both the right—his sense of love for his fellow Jew (*chesed*) —and the left—his desire to rid the world of unmitigated evil and cruelty (*gevurah*). Moses, like the Torah itself, combined both right and left, water and fire.

Moses' ability to combine right and left is alluded to in his very name: the word "Moses" is said to be an acronym for Moshe, Shamai and Hillel (See *Likkutei Sichos* 5752, parshas Shemini). Shamai and Hillel were two of the most famous Sages and known for their opposite

personalities. Shamai was the stern disciplinarian who rejected a would-be convert who wanted to be taught the entire Torah while standing on one foot. Hillel, on the other hand, told the same seeker the famous words, “What is hateful to you do not do to others.”

Moses was a composite of both Hillel and Shamai, and he was therefore the very personification of Torah. And it was to Torah that he went to get direction and inspiration as to how to deal with the cruel taskmaster.

No Man!

We must now understand the connection of this idea to the words “and he saw that no man was there.”

When Moses embraced the totality of Torah, its Divine synthesis of right and left, he saw that “no man was there;” it is not a man made ideology. Torah came from no mortal thought or speech; it is G-d’s unadulterated, immortal word.

Hiding in the Sand

The Torah continues, “He struck the Egyptian and hid him in the sand.” The “Egyptian” here alludes to the power of exile to oppress, confine and limit the Jew both physically and spiritually. The word for Egypt in Hebrew is

“Mitzrayim,” which carries with it the connotation of constraints and limits; the hallmark of Galus-exile.

When we can combine both of Torah’s directions in the Moses mode, we are able to bury Galus-exile in the sand.

As long as our approach to Torah is one-sided - because we view it from the perspective of one among many equally competing ideologies and disciplines - we and the Torah remain enmeshed in Galus. Even when we view Torah as Divine but see it as being limited in scope, we are seeing Torah in a compromised Galus form. However, when we realize the infinite and multi-directional level of Torah, we can gain access to its elevated essence and transcend all the manifestations of exile.

The seeds for the Egyptian Exodus were thus sown when Moses went out to see how his brethren were doing and applied the Torah-synthesis towards saving the Jewish slave.

The lesson for us here in the last generation of Galus and first generation of Geulah-Redemption is that we must bury the exile constraints in the sand, i.e., recognize that Torah, unlike other disciplines, is not a “man.” Torah is Divine. When we internalize and live by the Moses-model of humility we can access that Divinity, which enables us to break out of all the constraints of Exile, with the imminent Redemption through Moshiach.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

It is impossible to fathom the suffering of good people. We dare not look for rationalizations for their pain and suffering.

This will change in the future Messianic Age.

The prophet Isaiah proclaimed of the Messianic Age: “You will say on that day, ‘I thank you, G-d, for you were angry with me, and now Your wrath has subsided and You have comforted me.”

Only when salvation occurs, can we go back and understand how all of the suffering and pain of the past were blessings in disguise.

Until then, we must do everything in our power to fight suffering and never rationalize it.

ESSAY EIGHTEEN

GIVE CREDIT WHERE CREDIT IS DUE

“The Egyptian Man Saved Us”

Moses killed an Egyptian taskmaster, fled the wrath of Pharaoh and ended up in Midian, where he saved the daughters of Yisro from some shepherds who harassed them.

When they returned home, Yisro asked them, “how could you come so quickly?” They responded, “An Egyptian man saved us from the shepherds and he even drew water for us and watered the sheep.”

Why did they refer to Moses as an Egyptian?

The Midrash provides two explanations:

The first is that he was dressed in Egyptian attire.

The second is that they were actually referring to the Egyptian taskmaster who Moses killed. The Midrash explains that when the daughters of Yisro expressed gratitude to Moses because he saved them from the shepherds, Moses said to them, “It was that Egyptian whom

I killed that saved you.” Therefore, they said to their father, “An Egyptian man saved us,” meaning to say: Who caused Moses to come to our aid? An Egyptian man whom Moses killed.”

If not for the death of the Egyptian taskmaster, Moses would not have been forced to flee to Midian and Yisro’s daughters would not have been saved by him. Hence, indirectly, the Egyptian taskmaster was the one who saved them.

No Gratitude to Evil!

This explanation demands further explanation. How could one be thankful for the cruel, sadistic and evil taskmaster who was engaged in brutally attacking a helpless Jewish slave? Are we to conclude that we should be grateful to evil people generally because, occasionally, their evil elicits a positive response from others or has a ripple effect, which, in the long run, might put someone in the right place at the right time?

Imagine someone is drowning and a person fleeing from a terrorist jumps in the water and saves him. Should the one rescued from drowning express gratitude to the terrorist?

Obviously, one does not thank a criminal whose illegal behavior may actually lead to a positive outcome. If that

were the case we would be singing the praises of as many evil people as we do of good people.

Moses' Humility

Rather, as Etz Yosef (a Midrashic commentary) explains, Moses, in his humility, sought to downplay his own role in saving the daughters of Yisro. Instead, Etz Yosef writes, he sought to get the daughters of Yisro to express gratitude to G-d, who orchestrated these events.

The above explanation is based on the theological paradox that while we have free choice in deciding to do good or evil, everything that happens is by Divine Providence.

Hence, while the sadistic Egyptian taskmaster was fully responsible for his evil actions and received his just deserts, the entire episode was part of the Divine plan that lead to the liberation of the Jewish people from Egyptian bondage.

Moses alluded to the Egyptian taskmaster to impress upon Yisro's daughters that their salvation, although directly the result of Moses' personal choice to perform a Mitzvah, was part of G-d's plan. Moses' response was more a lesson in Jewish theology than an expression of his personal humility.

Why Repeat Moses' Words?

A question still remains though. Why would Yisro's daughters repeat Moses' disclaimer that the Egyptian taskmaster was indirectly responsible for their salvation? By repeating Moses' downplaying of his role, they were denying him the credit he deserved.

Although one may answer this question by asserting that Yisro's daughters were trying to demonstrate Moses' humility to their father, a question still gnaws: How can the Torah ascribe salvation of the Jewish people to the cruel and sadistic Egyptian taskmaster as he mercilessly beat a Jewish slave?

Some commentators explain that the reference was not so much to the taskmaster as Moses' act of saving the Jewish slave. Moses was trying to explain to the daughters that saving people was his mission. It started with killing the cruel taskmaster and continued with saving strangers from persecution and oppression.

However, the Torah does not mention of Moses' act of killing the taskmaster, just that the daughters described him as the "Egyptian Man." Why does the Torah invoke the mention of an evil person and ascribe their salvation to him?

Watershed Event

We must also realize that this event was a watershed event in Moses' life and by extension the lives of the Jewish nation with repercussions for all eternity. Through Moses' relationship with Yisro, he was chosen as the Liberator of the Jewish people:

First, while tending Yisro's flocks Moses ran after a stray lamb and found it at the site of the Burning Bush. It was at that moment that G-d determined Moses' worthiness as a leader, as one who cared even for the least significant of his flock. That was the time and place G-d first communicated with Moses and selected him as the Redeemer of Israel.

Second, Moses' relationship with Yisro influenced him to join the Jewish people. Moreover, according to the Zohar, G-d waited to give the Torah until Yisro arrived. The Torah itself relates how Yisro was responsible for the structure of the judicial system, which would prove crucial for the implementation of the laws of the Torah.

Yisro, clearly, had a pivotal role in what happened to Moses and the Jewish people.

All of this chain of events began when Moses saved Yisro's daughters and they reported this event to their father, characterizing him as an Egyptian. This suggests that Moses' ascription of their salvation to the Egyptian taskmaster was not just an expression of modesty. Rather,

Moses was presciently setting the stage for the Exodus from Egypt and for all our future redemptions, including the final Redemption from this exile.

Indeed, as our Sages state, Moses was the first Redeemer and he will be the last Redeemer. This is explained to mean that the final Redemption will come through Moses' influence and that the seeds for it have already been planted by him.

Moses, by attributing the daughters' salvation to the Egyptian task master, was trying to reexamine the negative events of the past and discover the good in everything that happened to him.

Changing Dynamic

To be liberated one must be able to see everything in perspective. When one goes through a painful experience, it is impossible to fathom why it is happening. We must accept the fact that everything G-d does is for the good. This is a matter of faith; we cannot possibly comprehend the suffering of good people. When another person suffers we dare not look for rationalizations for their pain and suffering.

However, as we approach the era of our final liberation, this dynamic changes. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed of the

Messianic Age: “You will say on that day, ‘I thank you, G-d, for you were angry with me, and now Your wrath has subsided and You have comforted me.” Only when salvation occurs, can we go back and understand how all of the suffering and pains of the past were blessings in disguise. Until then, we must do everything in our power to fight suffering and never rationalize it.

As the Exodus from Egyptian bondage was about to begin, Moses was given the “luxury” of seeing things in hindsight and gaining some modicum of understanding how they could be positive.

When Moses liberated the persecuted daughters of Yisro, he sensed, consciously or subconsciously, that the **time** of the Redemption of the Jewish people had arrived. This meant that events were going to come into sharper relief.

Moses now looked back and realized that had the taskmaster not beaten the Jewish slave, he would not have killed him and he would not have been forced to come to Midian and would not have saved the daughters of Yisro, thus unleashing a series of events that would culminate with the giving of the Torah. Although he might not have known at that time how far the chain of events would take him, Moses was able to see, however slightly, the positive energy that exists even in exile conditions.

This can be taken a step further. By ascribing their salvation, and by extension the subsequent Exodus and future Redemptions, to the Egyptian, Moses revealed that the power of Redemption is contained within the exile itself. One does not have to look beyond the exile for salvation; the seeds for it are planted within it.

Two Tracks

As we stand today on the threshold of the final Redemption - as the Rebbe revealed, “the time of the Redemption has arrived” - we are equipped with a better sense of appreciating the events of the past. Of course, it will not be possible for us to thank G-d for **all** of our exile conditions until we “open our eyes” and see how the Redemption is in front of us. As long as our eyes have not fully opened we must take a two track approach to all the exile conditions.

On the one hand, we must still do everything in our power to resist evil and relieve pain from the world; fight exile with all of our might. Paradoxically, we must also try to see the positive in all that is happening in exile and recognize that the seeds for the Redemption are contained within it. All we must do is reveal the hidden dynamic of exile and introduce the *aleph*-Master of the World to the word *golah*-exile and we have *Geulah*-Redemption.

Taking Credit

We can gain another insight from Moses' crediting the episode with the Egyptian taskmaster for his rescue of Yisro's daughters.

If, in the realm of evil, one can trace a positive event's genesis to evil behavior, certainly we can and must also trace the genesis of positive events to good behavior.

When the final Redemption occurs, imminently, we will be able to trace that glorious outcome to the Mitzvos we do today. Each Mitzvah starts a chain of events that can lead to the final Redemption. And while there will be many people able to take credit for the Redemption, that will not detract from our own contributions, any more than the "credit" an Egyptian taskmaster received for saving Yisro's daughters detracted from the merit earned by Moses when he actually saved them.

ESSAY NINETEEN

OBSESSION FOR LIFE

Whether it is praying for children, nurturing life, saving lives, showing contempt for those who take the lives of others lightly, women were always in the forefront of the Jewish nation, when it came to the quest for and promotion and preservation of life.

ESSAY NINETEEN

OBSESSION FOR LIFE

Pivotal Role of Women in Forging a Nation

This week's parsha introduces us to the Jewish nation. And while Genesis revolved around our Patriarchs and Matriarchs, the progenitors of the Jewish nation, it is in the Book of Exodus, which we commence reading this week, that we learn of the formation of the Jewish people.

One of the remarkable things we see in this week's parsha that stands out is the pivotal role of women in the formation of the nation.

If one hard to find one word that describes virtually all of the Biblical women it is "life." From Eve—whose Hebrew name Chava means life—to Esther—who saved the lives of the entire Jewish nation—women are constantly depicted as people for whom life is the highest ideal.

Whether it is praying for children, nurturing life, saving lives, showing contempt for those who take the lives of others lightly, women were always in the forefront of the

Jewish nation, when it came to the quest for and promotion and preservation of life.

Let us review some of the salient portions of this week's parsha as they are recorded in the Biblical text, as well as they are illuminated in the Oral traditions of the Torah recorded in the Talmud, Midrash and Rashi:

Women in Action to Bring and Save Life

(a) In the very beginning, we find how Pharaoh demanded that the two midwives, Shifra and Puah (whom the Talmud—conveying an oral tradition—says that they were actually Yocheved and Miriam, Moses' mother and wife respectively), were to murder all of the newborn baby boys. They not only defied his orders, but they provided the children with food and water (Rashi). This is expressed in the words: "And they gave life to the children."

(b) Later on, the Torah tells us, somewhat cryptically, about the marriage of a "man of the tribe of Levi" with the "daughter of Levi," from which Moses was born. From other Biblical sources we know that the man was Amram and the woman was Yocheved, identified in other places as the parents of Moses.

Now, the problem that arises here is that they had already been married for some time and had already been the

parents of Miriam and Aaron. Why does the Torah make it seem that they just got married?

Rashi, quoting the Talmud, provides us with the subtext, the “in between the lines” details, that is part of the Oral tradition:

When Pharaoh issued his horrible decree that all the little boys should be thrown into the Nile, Amram, who occupied an exalted position of leadership, separated from his wife, reasoning that it would be futile to bring children into the world only to have them thrown into the Nile. When the populace saw how their esteemed leader was reluctant to bring children into the world they followed suit.

At that point, Miriam, their eldest child, said to her father that his action will yield even more catastrophic results than that of Pharaoh: “While Pharaoh’s decree affected the males,” she said to her father, “your action will affect the males as well as the females.” Amram retook his wife Yocheved, and that union gave birth to Moses who liberated and, indeed, saved the Jewish people. It was Miriam’s obsession with life thus that saved the day.

Conjunction of Three Women

(c) When Moses’ basket was placed into the Nile, Miriam waited to see what will happen. Sure enough, Bitya (or

Batya) the daughter of Pharaoh (whom, our Sages say, adopted the Monotheistic faith of the Jewish people), “stretched out her arm, and risked her position, to save the life of Moses, and thereby of the entire Jewish nation.

(d) When the little Moses refused to nurse from the Egyptian nurses, Miriam offers to get a Jewish nursing woman—Moses’ mother—to nurture her little child in Pharaoh’s palace!

The conjunction of the three women: Miriam, Bitya and Yocheved in saving and nurturing the precious life of history’s greatest person.

(e) Moses flees to Midian, after having killed an Egyptian taskmaster, and meets Jethro’s seven daughters drawing water to feed the sheep of their father. Again, women are portrayed as people involved in nurturing life.

(f) During Moses return trip to Egypt to carry out his mission he was charged with by G-d at the burning bush, Moses stayed in an inn with his wife and newborn, uncircumcised child. All of a sudden (an angel of) G-d sought to kill Moses, because, as Rashi teaches, he neglected to circumcise his son in a timely fashion. Immediately, Moses’ wife Tziporah, circumcises the child and saves Moses’ life. Once again, a righteous woman depicted as a life-saver.

(g) According to the Talmud, the Egyptian bondage took its heaviest toll on the men. They had been broken and had despaired of ever getting out. They no longer wanted to continue their family life. Only the women never lost faith. They prodded their husbands, and they produced generations of Jews that would ultimately leave Egypt and become part of the eternal nation.

In the words of the Talmud, “In the merit of the righteous women of that generation the Jews were liberated from Egypt.”

It is axiomatic in Torah literature that history repeats itself, especially with regard to the parallel between the bondage and Exodus from Egypt and the Redemption from the preset exile.

Just as it were the women of the Egyptian exile that were responsible for the emergence and birth of Jewish life, so too, the future Redemption will be ushered in through the faith, optimism, life-affirming attitude and efforts of the women.

ESSAY TWENTY

REMOVE YOUR SHOES

In truth, every Jew was charged with the responsibility to be a leader.

Being a leader is a delicate tightrope act, maintaining a healthy and productive balance between feeling the pain of others and not falling apart in despair.

ESSAY TWENTY

REMOVE YOUR SHOES

Feel their Pain!

The first time G-d had spoken to Moses, appointing him as the liberator of the Jewish people, his encounter with G-d occurred at the burning bush.

As Moses approached to see the marvel—a burning bush not consumed by fire—he was told by G-d: “Remove your shoes from your feet.”

The question here is: why did G-d order him to remove his shoes?

And, perhaps, more importantly, what can we learn from this command? After all, this encounter Moses had with G-d is what determined the future course of human history. It stands to reason that the order to remove his shoes carries some profound symbolism for future generations.

One explanation for the removal of shoes is that unlike one who wears shoes, one who walks barefoot feels even the

smallest piece of debris. One of the reasons we do not wear leather shoes on Yom Kippur is so that we deny ourselves the comfort of not feeling the roughness of the earth. In other words, shoes represent the medium through which we can divorce ourselves from the rough edges in our lives that may intrude from the outside.

Of all people who can feel the roughness of the earth, a leader is most likely to be affected by the suffering, pain and criticisms from the outside. As humans we are all designed by our Creator to block out disturbing images and experiences, so that we can cope with life. The more painful the outside world, the more our defenses put “shoes” on our feet, so that we do not feel the roughness of the outside world that we engage.

It follows that for a leader to retain his sanity he must have thick skin. Just as a physician or nurse must learn not to fall apart every time they see illness and death, otherwise they would be incapable of helping those whom they are charged with helping, so too, a leader has to wear the emotional shoes to make their task bearable.

There is, however, a danger that lurks in the attempt to shield oneself from the pain of the outside. The leader can lose his sensitivity to the very people he was sent to help. The coping mechanism does not know how to distinguish between not falling apart at the sight of misery and

becoming inured to the suffering and pain.

Striking the Right Balance

To strike the right balance, leaders must begin their leadership with a strong dose of vulnerability. They cannot start their role wearing all the protective armor they might need to wear later in the course of the execution of their leadership responsibilities.

In addition, there are times when they have to stop what they are doing and reflect on the needs of the people in an empathetic way and perhaps even shed a few tears at the plight of human beings..

The Lubavitcher Rebbe would receive tens of thousands of letters from people throughout the world; asking him for his counsel and blessing in dealing with their pain and anguish. Every imaginable problem was brought to his attention, and the Rebbe personally responded to thousands of these letters with his fatherly and sage advice and blessing.

I remember vividly how before the sounding of the Shofar on Rosh Hashanah, the Rebbe would take huge bundles of these letters—that represented the pain and suffering of multitudes—up to the Bimah from where he sounded the Shofar. Right before the Shofar sounding would start; the

Rebbe would envelop himself and these bundles in his talis and would cry bitterly for a few minutes.

As Moses is about to be selected from the ranks of the Jewish people to be their first leader, G-d told him to remove this shoes. “I want you to genuinely feel the pain of the people you will be leading. And while you might have to avail yourself of the defense mechanism so that you could endure the pain, never allow those shoes to desensitize you to the plight of the Jewish people.”

Every Jew a Leader

In truth, every Jew was charged with the responsibility to be a leader. And being a leader is a delicate tightrope act, maintaining a healthy and productive balance between feeling the pain of others and not falling apart in despair.

We must learn from Moses to “remove our shoes” when we stand in front of the “burning bush”—a metaphor for the holiness of every Jew who is in possession of a soul that is on fire—and not be willing to accept the suffering of others. When we go out to actually redeem the Jews from Egypt, we must then put our shoes on so that we do not become depressed and demoralized by the degradation and pitiful state of the people we were chosen to help.

In the present Messianic-threshold age, our role as leaders

is more pronounced than ever. It is the responsibility of each us to activate the Moses and Moshiach spark within us so that we can help bring an end to the galut-exile. And as we try to help others in their personal journey out of Egypt-exile, we must remember to begin our mission by removing our shoes so that we know, feel and appreciate the needs of the Jewish people and the entire world.

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

TAKE OFF THE MASK!

There are restrictions that have been placed on the study of the mystical teachings of the Torah.

These restrictions were not intended as red lights.

They were merely stop signs to prepare us for the entry into these very powerful areas of study.

Don't go to areas that are beyond your level; find a worthy teacher who can bring the teachings down to your level on the way to raising you up to his level.

Remove your shoes so you realize that you are not studying an academic subject. It is holy turf you are treading upon; treat it with respect and reverence. But don't cover your face!

ESSAY TWENTY-ONE

TAKE OFF THE MASK!

Moses Wouldn't Look

In this week's parsha, Moses is tending his father-in-law's sheep when he approaches the "Mountain of G-d." At this point the Torah describes what he saw and what he did:

"An angel of G-d appeared to him in a flame of fire from within the thorn-bush. And he gazed, and look!—the thorn-bush was burning with fire, but the thorn-bush was not being consumed. Moses said, "Let me turn now and see this great spectacle! Why will the thorn bush not burn?"

G-d saw that he had turned to see, and G-d called to him from within the thorn-bush, and He said, "Moses, Moses!"

He said, "Here I am!"

And He [G-d] said, "Do not draw near here. Take your shoes off your feet, because the place upon which you stand is holy soil!" He said, "I am the G-d

of your father, the G-d of Abraham, the G-d of Isaac and the G-d of Jacob.”

Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at G-d.”

In the Talmud there are two views whether Moses’ refusal to gaze at the sight of the burning bush was a positive matter or it was negative. It is easy to understand why it was positive. Moses was in such awe of this Divine experience that he felt unworthy of gazing on this manifestation of G-d.

Moreover, when Moses approached to see the marvel, he was told by G-d not to approach and to remove his shoes and only after that Moses covered his face. By telling him not to approach and to remove his shoes wasn’t G-d intimating to him that he should keep a certain distance from this bush? So why fault Moses for taking G-d’s hint a step further and covering his face?

In truth, both opinions are true and are not mutually exclusive. Moses did the right thing for covering his face and Moses did the “wrong” thing for covering his face. How can we accept both opinions?

Two Types of Right and Wrong

To answer the question, it is important to distinguish two types of rights and wrongs. The rights and wrongs in the first category are the absolutes that never change and they are not relative. It is absolutely wrong—and will always be absolutely wrong—for anyone to hurt an innocent person. It is absolutely right and desirable to help the needy.

There is another category of rights and wrongs that are by design relative and temporary. A child may not drive a car. Obviously an adult may drive a car. And even the child will outgrow that restriction.

When it comes to our exposure to G-d's presence, there are times and places when it is desirable and there are people for whom the time and place might vary.

When G-d wishes to make His presence felt to someone, there can be two reactions. One can, out of curiosity, attempt to get closer. That can prove disastrous. The opposite reaction is to be repelled by that exposure and recoil in fear. Moses exhibited both of these reactions. At first he was curious and then he recoiled by covering his face.

The fact that his action provoked two opposite opinions as to its propriety tells us that this area of right and wrong is indeed relative and subject to change with the passage of time.

When we encounter a situation such as Moses did; we have a spiritual experience, and we wonder if we should pursue it or run away from it, we have to realize that there are different responses for different people at different times and places.

Err on the Side of Getting closer to G-d

In Moses' case, the message he received from G-d was to not get closer. Moses was in doubt as to whether he should look or cover his face. Was G-d's instruction to him not to approach and to remove his shoes a sign that G-d wanted him to cover his face or not. Moses felt he had to err on the side of caution.

However, the Talmud by voicing a mild criticism of Moses for doing that conveys the message that when in doubt and we have to err it is better to err on the side of getting closer to G-d.

The lesson we can glean from this story is that when G-d comes to us and gives us instructions as to how close we can come, we must not take that as a cue that we should add on more barriers than already exists. And even the barriers that exist today might come off the next day when we mature and are capable of getting closer.

A Stop Sign is Not a Red Light

To use a simple metaphor from traveling by car: A stop sign is not a red light. We don't have to wait for the stop sign to turn into a start sign to proceed. It just means pause, take note, be cautious, and, by all means, proceed!

When Moses was told by G-d to not get closer and remove his shoes, it was not intended as a signal to Moses that he create even more restrictions on his encounter with G-d.

The same can be applied to many aspects of Judaism.

For example: There are restrictions that have been placed on the study of the mystical teachings of the Torah. These restrictions were not intended as red lights. They were merely stop signs to prepare us for the entry into these very powerful areas of study.

But by all means we should not cover our faces. Just don't go to areas that are beyond your level; find a worthy teacher who can bring the teachings down to your level on the way to raising you up to his level.

Remove your shoes so you realize that you are not studying an academic subject. It is holy turf you are treading upon; treat it with respect and reverence. But don't cover your face!

Should we Obsess with Moshich?

Another example relates to the restrictions placed on the efforts we make to hasten the Messianic Age. Throughout rabbinic literature we will find what appear to be restrictions on these efforts. For example, the Talmud states one should not try to “force the end.”

Likewise, the Talmud states, one should not try to calculate from Biblical verses when Moshiach would come. The Midrash relates that when Jacob, in last week’s parsha, wanted to reveal the time of the final redemption, this knowledge was taken from him.

These and other references could appear as warnings not to get too close; not to be preoccupied with the subject of Moshiach and Redemption.

However, there are even a multitude of references that convey the opposite message. Jewish classical sources speak of the need to pray for, and even demand Moshiach.

Moreover, in the famous *Ani Ma’amin* recitation, where we express our most fundamental beliefs, we state clearly and unequivocally “And even though he tarries I await his coming every day.” And indeed our central prayer—the Shemoneh Esrei, or Amidah—expresses this sentiment when we ask G-d to bring Moshiach speedily, for “we wait for your salvation all the day.”

We Cannot be Passive about Moshiach

Clearly, our Sages did not intend for us to be passive about the coming of Moshiach. One cannot say, “Whenever G-d wants to bring Moshiach, it’s His business. My role is to simply perform the Mitzvot and study Torah.”

This approach is clearly contradicted by explicit statements throughout Torah literature that we must do everything in our power to bring Moshiach, The Talmud lists many observances that are geared to bring the redemption such as the giving of Tzedakah, having children, etc.

How do we reconcile what appears to be contradictory positions about our role in getting close to Moshiach? Do we close our eyes as Moses did or do we keep them wide open, even as we know our limits and that we stand on holy turf?

The answer is that the Messianic Age, as the esoteric teachings of Kabbalah (which are inter-connected), involve both sentiments.

On the one hand there were times when it was premature to study Kabbalah and to focus on the Messianic Age. But with the passage of time things changed and these subjects became timely and even urgent.

Already in the thirteenth century, Nachmanides (the greatest Jewish scholar and leader of his time, not to be

confused with Maimonides) states that the prohibition concerning calculating the deadline for Moshiach has passed. Now that we are so close to the time of Redemption, he writes, it is permissible to engage in that kind of speculation.

“Are we Home Yet”

Malbim (a great 19th century Bible commentator) explains the reason for the change in attitude and compares it to being on a journey. As long as we are on the road we do not focus on the destination for that will take our eyes off the road. But once we near the end of our journey, everything changes. At that point, it behooves us to do everything we can do to make sure that we know where, when and how we will find our destination and be prepared to enter into it.

long as we were on the road, and were far from the period of Redemption, there were some justifiable roadblocks that were appropriately set up to prevent us from overly investigating the subject in depth and being preoccupied with it. There was a time when it was proper to hide our face, even as we never lost our faith and hope for it.

However, as history progressed and the time of Redemption has gotten closer, the greatest Jewish leaders of all stripes—Ashkenazic Sephardic, Chassidic, Non-

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Chassidic, etc. have all instructed us to prepare ourselves to greet Moshiach and for the final Redemption.

Now it is time to proceed after the stop signs that were put in our way. Now is the time to remove the cover from our face and to stare Redemption in its face.

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

NO REST

Moses, the paragon of truth could not countenance the idea that his actions would be a “temporary fix.”

It was so contrary to his nature and ideal.

Therefore, Moses asked G-d to let a more consistent leader begin the process that will end in ultimate and permanent success.

ESSAY TWENTY-TWO

NO REST

Moses' Arguments

When Moses was asked by G-d at the burning bush to serve as the liberator of the Jewish people, he demurred. Moses in his humility “argued” with G-d that he should not be the one to assume this responsibility. Either he was not worthy to be their leader, or that the Jewish people were not worthy of being redeemed, or that he does not know what to say to them, or that they would not listen to him, or that he stuttered.

G-d refuted all his arguments and promised him success in his mission.

But, even after all of this Moses came up with a new argument:

“Please, my Master, send the one that you usually send.”

Rashi, the principal Bible commentator explains that Moses meant to say to G-d, why send me; send my much more articulate brother Aaron to be Your official spokesman.

Alternatively, Rashi explains that Moses' argument was, why send him; send the one that you will eventually send, i.e., Moshiach, the final leader and redeemer of the Jewish people. Moses argued, 'why send me, who is not destined to take them into the Promised Land and be their redeemer in the future.'

In other words, Moses argued that there was no point in having him do a half-baked job of liberating them from Egypt, when, in the end, someone else will have to complete the task. Why not send someone who can do everything from a to z without any interruption.

Moses' argument raises an obvious question. True, Moses had a prophetic premonition that he was not destined to be their final leader, but what is wrong for him to do the first crucial half of the liberating process? Certainly, Moses, the most humble person that ever lived, could not have been offended by the fact that he would not complete the job.

There are two intertwined ways of answering this question.

Moses and Truth

The first is to focus on Moses' character. Among his other qualities, Moses is said to personify the attribute of truth. Our Sages tell us that the refrain "Moses is true and his

teachings are true,” was uttered by his greatest critics in the aftermath of the Korach rebellion.

What is the definition of truth?

Truth is much more than stating the facts honestly, accurately and unembellished. According to the Talmudic definition of truth, it involves consistency. The Hebrew word for truth, which is *emes*, contains the first middle and last letters of the Hebrew alphabet, suggesting that in order for something to be *emes* it must be consistent from the beginning through the middle to the end.

Moses, the paragon of truth, thus, could not countenance the idea that his actions would be a “temporary fix.” It was so contrary to his nature and ideal. Therefore, Moses asked G-d to let a more consistent leader begin the process that will end in ultimate and permanent success.

Leaders Demand Success

There is yet another approach to Moses’ hesitancy. Moses, by making this argument that there was no point in him beginning the process if he would not be able to complete it was what is expected of a true leader.

The difference between a leader and a follower is that the latter cares about the success of the task at hand without

regard for all of the other steps and ramifications of that task.

The story is told of a delegation of some of the greatest rabbis in Russia who traveled to Petersburg to help change a harsh decree against the Jewish community but failed. When one the members of the delegation later visited Rabbi Sholom Dovber Schneerson (the fifth leader of the Chabad-Lubavitch movement) in his hotel room, he found him crying. “Why are you crying,” he asked, “we did everything in our power to change the decree.”

To this the Rabbi Sholom Dovber replied: “But we did not succeed.”

Both rabbis were prepared to give their lives for the success of their mission. Both worked tirelessly for the needs of the Jewish community; yet only one of them could not be consoled, knowing that they had done all that could have been expected of them. How do we explain their different reactions to failure.

The answer lies in the difference between the way a dedicated person looks at his mission and the way the leader views it. The former sees the task at hand, and does everything humanly possible to succeed no less so than the leader. The difference lies in how they view their mission. The hallmark of a true leader is one who cannot rest and find comfort until he brings the process to fruition. His

devotion and love to his people is so intense and earnest that he cannot imagine failure. And if it happens that he does not succeed it evokes the most profound feelings of sadness to the point of tears.

We are All Now Leaders

Living on the threshold of the Messianic Age, we are all presently charged with the role of leadership. Our task now is not to achieve some preliminary positive result, no matter how important and commendable, but to bring about the end of the suffering in exile. This we can accomplish even by one Mitzvah that “pushes us over the top,” and we cannot rest until we succeed to bring about the final Redemption.

ESSAY TWENTY-THREE

WORKAHOLICS AND EGYPTIAN BONDAGE

There are people who are so dedicated to their profession or business that they have no sense of time; they are workaholics.

Frequently their obsession with constant work will cause them to neglect their families, their religious and Jewish educational responsibilities.

For all intents and purposes, they are very much in an “Egyptian bondage” situation.

ESSAY TWENTY-THREE

WORKAHOLICS AND EGYPTIAN BONDAGE

Defining the Galus-Perech form of slavery

This week's Torah portion, entitled "*Shemos*," describes the enslavement of the Jewish people in Egypt. Not only did the Egyptians take away their freedom by forcing them to work for them, but they also subjected them to an unusually cruel type of work: *Avodas perech*, usually rendered "back-breaking labor."

What is "*Galus perech*?" According to *Rambam* (Maimonides) (whose *yahrtzeit* (the anniversary of his passing), occurs on the 20th of *Tevet*, which usually coincides with this week's *Parsha*), it is a reference to work, which has no limit and produces no benefit.

We are required to remember the Exodus from Egypt daily, because we are, figuratively speaking, still very much subjected to Egyptian slavery, even as we enjoy unprecedented freedom. Accordingly, it is important for us to understand the dynamics of *Galus perech* in our lives, so

that we can also discover the mechanism to liberate ourselves from it.

At first glance, the imperative to apply the Egyptian experience to our lives appears rather strange. Most of us, who grew up in America, probably cannot fathom what relevance this aspect of the Exodus has to our lives in this modern world. Thank G-d, we never experienced losing our freedom and independence in this good and free America and other Western Democracies. We certainly cannot relate to the idea of *Avodas perech*-form of slave labor. Or could we?

Workaholics

There are people who are so dedicated to their profession or business that they have no sense of time; they are workaholics. Frequently their obsession with constant work will cause them to neglect their families, their religious and Jewish educational responsibilities. For all intents and purposes, they are very much in an “Egyptian bondage” situation. This obsession with work parallels Maimonides’ idea of *Avodas perech* as work that has no limit.

Furthermore, the benefits we do enjoy from our work can only be real if our labor serves as the “vessel” or instrument for G-d’s blessing. For, after all, it is not our work itself that brings benefit, but G-d’s blessing

Our efforts are the instruments He gave us through which we channel His blessings. If, however, the instrument is misshapen, it cannot elicit (all, or even part) of G-d's blessings. And while it may seem that the workaholic or the person obsessed with work will generate much profit, the person could really never truly enjoy those gains. No matter how much one makes, they still feel the need to make more.

In modern parlance we refer to this syndrome as the rat race, in Biblical jargon this type of work is the modern day equivalent of *Avodas perech*. The work is endless and the benefits elusive.

The antidote: healthy *Avodas perech*

Good and evil possess parallel systems. To know how to cure our enslavement to our work, we must find and unleash its positive counterpart, the “kosher” form of *Avodas perech*.

When the soul of the individual devotes itself to its service of G-d in an unlimited and unrestricted fashion; when the soul is prepared to give everything—with total self-sacrifice—for G-d, that is the first characteristic of *Avodas perech*. Obsession for positive ideals can be a healthy form of obsession.

This does not mean that the person has to divorce himself from the material world. Rather it means that one views everything in life as an opportunity to better serve G-d. Since life affords us infinite opportunities, this translates into infinite ways of serving G-d.

When one's service of G-d is generated from the soul, one does not seek any benefit for its service to G-d. It's not that no benefit will derive from this service; it simply means that one is imbued with a sense of dedication, in relation to which all benefits are meaningless. Not having any benefit means that one has transcended the need for those benefits. And when the benefits do arrive they are seen for what they truly are; positive results of positive action, and not as the "pay-off" for the initial sacrifice that was made.

Hence, the soul's dedication can be described as a positive form of *Avodas perech* because the work is of an endless, infinite nature and one that transcends all benefits.

Garbled messages from the soul

While we differentiated between kosher workaholics and its non-kosher counterpart, one may suggest that they are closely interrelated. The misguided obsession for work derives from the soul's love of labor for that which is good and holy. Workaholics actually use misplaced dedication,

which emanates from their soul's obsession with the higher and more G-dly pursuits in life.

We all possess this G-dly soul that is constantly “sending” us messages about its spiritual agenda and its G-dly desires. We do not always possess the proper “receptors” that understand what it is that the soul truly desires. Frequently our conscious mind “picks up” a warped and misguided message. As a result, instead of translating the soul's desires into idealistic efforts in that direction, we use it for the aimless dedication to our careers that knows no respite and has no moral and spiritual objective.

Modern day liberation from Egyptian Bondage

It is sad that we should misuse our G-d given talents for spiritual growth in the rat race of modern day life. Going out of Egypt daily in a modern context thus means, to acquire the proper perspective about our role in life, and a proper list of priorities.

Never before have we been plagued with this sort of Egyptian bondage. This can be attributed to the fact that we are on the verge of another Exodus, the Redemption from the exile we have been living through for close to two thousand years since the destruction of the Holy Temple. Our souls yearn to be free, and our souls are sending us messages that we very often misconstrue for the opposite.

Our souls are profoundly undernourished. They crave the spiritual benefits, both intrinsic as well as fringe, that accrue from total devotion to being G-d's partner in His plan to transform this world into His "dwelling-place." Instead, we harness the soul's energy to building sandcastles that cannot and will not endure.

Our own personal exodus from our own form of Egyptian bondage, by listening to our soul's voice and cry, will definitely prepare us and serve as a catalyst for the ultimate and imminent Redemption from physical exile.