

# Kehillah

#53



## THE PERTINENT PARASHA

### The Jewish Power of Vacuum

Rabbi Yeshoshua Pfeffer | Rav of Kehillat Ohr Chadash, Ramot, Jerusalem

*Sefer Shemos* is the book of our national birth. “And as for your birth, on the day you were born” (*Yechezkel* 16:4). As a newborn infant, we were born out of Egypt. This event, and the ensuing tale of our growth and maturation, is the subject of *Shemos*.

***Nature teaches us that a void is a means of connection.***

Ramban, in his introduction to the book, explains why *Shemos* ends with the enshrinement of the *Shechina* in the Mishkan. It was only then that we “returned to the elevation of the Avos.” The process of our birth and development reached its climax with the Mishkan, realizing the elevation of the Avos in a national sense.

Yet *Shemos* does not begin with the joy of birth, but with harsh exile. “Egypt enslaved the Children of Israel with crushing harshness” (*Shemos* 1:13-14). In *sefer Devarim*, the Torah notes that the throes of exile were part of our national formation: Egypt is described as the “iron furnace” (*Devarim* 4:20) in which we were fashioned.

But why did our coming into being require the hardships of Egypt’s “iron furnace”? Why did the transformation from family to nation, from Yaakov to Yisrael, require such a violent process?

Perhaps the best analogy by which to understand the need for the Egyptian exile is a vacuum. When a space is entirely devoid of matter, the void will produce suction whose strength, depending on Nature teaches us that a void is a means of





## THE PERTINENT PARASHA



connection. An empty space will not remain empty; it will pull something in to fill the void. It will connect.

In human terms, this principle is most prominent in the field of relationships. The relationship of Adam and Chava was initiated by Adam's missing limb:

his personal void created the compelling attraction to his wife Chava. Even today, the Gemara teaches that the same interaction is at play in a man's search for his soulmate: "The owner of the lost item searches for his loss" (*Kiddushin 2b*).

The same is true for friendships. An 80-year study of the Harvard Medical School demonstrated that nothing threatens our physical well-being more than loneliness. Loneliness is the vacuum that draws in friendships and relationships.

So too is the connection between the Jewish people and Hashem. We first had to experience a total void, reaching rock bottom under vicious Egyptian oppression, for the connection to be forged.

During those many days [...] the "Children of Israel groaned because of the work" (*Shemos 2:23*).

*"Then we cried out to Hashem, the God of our forefathers, and Hashem heard our voice" (Devarim 26:7).*

Avraham Avinu, too, had to endure the trial of the Akeida to cement his connection with Hashem. It was only the impossible situation of having to sacrifice his son and heir that consolidated his total trust in Hashem and confirmed the eternal divine promise: "For I shall surely bless you and greatly increase your offspring [...] and your offspring shall inherit the gate of its enemy" (*Bereishis 22:17*). For the nation, the connection of trust was forged in the harsh vacuum of exile.

As we continue to go through the hardships of war, we should recall the lesson. "There is no light," the Zohar teaches, "other than that which emerges from darkness" (*Tetzaveh, p. 184*). Such, the Gemara explains, is the way of the world: "First comes darkness and then comes light" (*Shabbos 77b*).

A void is a vehicle for connection, as darkness is a vehicle for light. It's up to us to turn our current void – our anxiety, our pain, and our hope – to connection.

Connection with others in unity, and connection with Hashem in prayer and trust.



## The New Egypt

Rabbi Yaacov Haber – Rav of Kehillas Shivtei Yeshurun, Ramat Beit Shemesh

*Sefer Shemos* begins with a new reality for the Jewish people, a reality which introduces their emergent prosperity and assimilation into Egyptian culture, and at the same time the growing antisemitism which ensued.

This was a new Egypt for Bnei Yisrael. Not only was there a new Pharaoh “who knew not Yosef,” but there was also a Jewish community that no longer recognized the Egypt they had known. What happened?

One of the things that happened is that Yaakov Avinu died. Apparently this was no small event. The Torah reports that when Yaakov passed away “the entire land of Egypt cried for seventy days.” This wasn’t just a day of mourning, a day of paying respects to a Jewish leader – they all cried. Modern estimates say that the population of ancient Egypt was about five million people. Five million people cried for seventy days! A city was renamed Avel Mitzrayim!

When I imagine this scene, I wonder – did the population know Yaakov?

Did they ever see him? Did they ever even hear of him? Why were they crying? Perhaps they didn’t know him; maybe they never even heard of him, yet the loss was immense. Every house in Egypt became a house of mourning.

***When the tzaddik was in a place, there was a certain positive energy that emanated from him. Things were different. There was blessing abounding.***

When Yaakov left Be’er Sheva, apparently something similar took place. “The dignity, the beauty, and the sparkle of Be’er Sheva was lost (Rashi, *Vayeitzei*). It seems to be a fact that when the tzaddik was in a place, there was a certain positive energy that emanated from him. Things were different. There was blessing abounding.





## Hashkafically Speaking



*It is possible that the Egyptians never even heard of Yaakov Avinu, but they did recognize that when he died somehow the blessing was missing. Everything changed. Somehow the happiness in the homes and the prosperity in the marketplace abruptly ended. Perhaps the Egyptians were crying and they didn't even know why they were crying! They were crying because an unexpected black cloud hovered over their land. Without being able to pinpoint why, they knew that things just weren't right anymore. For seventy days they cried and cried. When Yaakov died, Egypt was a different Egypt than it was*

*before.*

As the descendants of this great man, we have to understand our own contributions to the communities in which we live. God told Avraham that wherever he went he would create blessing. If we aspire to imitate the ways of Yaakov, and Yitzchak and Avraham before him, if we live with their selfless tenets and timeless teachings, we can also bring blessing to everyone around us.

Creating blessing is not only something we can do, it is our mandate. This is the life and indeed the purpose of the Jew.



## MEKOM AVODA

### Taking Responsibility

Rabbi Asher Meir | Torah and Policy Researcher

In three consecutive instances in our *parasha* Moshe Rabbeinu acts the part of the savior, or perhaps the vigilante. He kills the Egyptian taskmaster who is brutally beating a Hebrew worker (*Shemos* 2:12); soon afterward he intervenes in an altercation between two of his fellow Hebrews (2:13).

When Pharaoh hears of this, Moshe is compelled to flee to Midian, where he continues his heroics as he stands up against the shepherds who sought to drive away Yisro's daughters from the well.

The Torah certainly seems to be showing us that Moshe is fit to lead





the Jewish people, as he has a keen sense of justice alongside a willingness to face danger to defend the oppressed. Moshe follows the dictate we find in *Yirmeyahu* (21:12, 22:3): "Rescue the victim from the oppressor!" Seforno (*Shemos* 2:17) emphasizes that Moshe wasn't deterred by the fact that the disputants in Midian were foreigners, nor did he merely rebuke the oppressors; rather, "He arose to rescue the victims from their oppressors." Rav Yaakov Kamenetsky (*Emes LeYaakov, Shemos* 2:20) explains that Moshe was chosen to lead Israel exactly because his actions showed that he had a great aspiration to make all human affairs subject to justice.

Yet we find in other contexts that we are discouraged from meddling in the disputes and affairs of other people. Shlomo Hamelech warns us: "Intervening in someone else's dispute is like grabbing a dog by its ears" (*Mishlei* 26:17). *Chazal* warn us against arbitrarily involving ourselves in someone else's lawsuit (*Shevuos* 31a); Rashi and other *Rishonim* mention this as an example of Shlomo's admonition.

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld (*Shalmas Chaim, Choshen Mishpat* 3) responds to this exact question. Intervening in someone else's

dispute is often wrong because the *beis din* is entrusted with taking care of the matter. Rav Sonnenfeld takes for granted that had Moshe not intervened in these three cases, the wronged parties would have had no recourse to the courts or the authorities.

This is exactly how the Netziv explains Moshe's actions. According to the Netziv, Moshe did not "look this way and that" to see if no one was looking so that he could safely smite the cruel Egyptian. Rather, this expression means that Moshe "sought a way to complain about the Egyptian" - he looked around to find some authority to bring the wrongdoer to account. However, Moshe "saw there was no man" that would "tell him of the injustice, because all of them were a disloyal assembly and haters of Israel."

Moshe's actions exemplify the words of Hillel in the Mishna (*Avos* 2:5): "In a place where there are no men, strive to be a man." Rashi explains: "Occupy yourself with the needs of the public" if there is nobody else to do so; otherwise, occupy yourself with Torah. Indeed, the Be'er Mayim Chaim points out the similarity between the expression in our *parasha*, *ein ish* and the expression in the Mishna



*ein anashim*. Moshe first sought an appropriate authority; when he found none, he pursued justice on his own.

The Rambam (*Sanhedrin* 2:7) explicitly connects Moshe's extra-judiciary actions in our *parasha* to his character as an ideal model for a judge: "One characteristic of a 'man of valor' [mentioned by Yisro] is to have courage to save the victim from his oppressor, as we find in the case where 'Moshe arose and saved them [Yisro's daughters].'"

The Torah teaches us that the proper order for society is to have an effective *beis din* system with courageous and learned judges, including all the necessary elements for an effective criminal justice system. When we encounter wrongdoing, we should first "look this way and that" to see if redress can be achieved by some recognized Torah authority, or, where permissible, by some recognized secular authority. Only if we see that *ein ish* – the existing establishment provides no recourse – should we consider taking matters into our own hands.

Moshe's example also teaches us that if institutions are inadequate, it is not enough to continually deal with problems in an ad hoc way.

Rather, alongside managing the

situation we should work together to build the appropriate establishment, as Moshe himself founded the entire system of *sarim* – judges and community authorities – which made his own individual intervention unnecessary (*Shemos* 18).

**When we encounter wrongdoing, we should first "look this way and that"**

Examining the words of the Rambam, we discern the pivotal role played by Yisro in identifying and cultivating Moshe's unique qualities. It was particularly Yisro who esteemed Moshe's commitment to justice in saving his daughters from the shepherds at the well; his daughters just came home and told the story, but Yisro was determined to make him part of his household. Later on, it was Yisro who explained to Moshe that the best use of this commitment is not to execute justice himself, but rather to use this commitment to identify "men of valor" who would for all future generations courageously defend victims from their oppressors under just laws and recognized courts.



## More Exceptions to the Rule regarding Favors and *Ribbis*

Rabbi Shloimy Muller

Talmid of Rav Pinchas Vind *shlita*, founder of the Beis Horaah L'Inyanei Ribbis

We mentioned last week that although a borrower may benefit his lender if he would have done so in the absence of his loan, there are several exceptions. The first one is a public favor, such as lending an apartment or a car. However, if this was standard behavior between them prior to the loan, and they regularly lent each other their apartment or car, it would be okay.

The reason for this halacha is that such a favor is a problem of *maris ayin*, meaning that people think that this favor is a result of the loan. That's why if this favor was often done regardless of the loan there's no problem.

One may ask: What if I lent my neighbor a couple of eggs or a liter of milk? Is it a problem now for my in-laws to stay in their apartment? Does one have to make sure that all minor loans are paid up before borrowing one's neighbor's car? The halacha is that no, these minor loans do not pose a problem in this respect.

The reasoning is that it's clear that the favor of lending an apartment or a car is not payment for such a loan, because the value of these favors far outweighs the value of such a loan.

There are two more exceptions to the rule. One is that the lender may not use

the borrower's items without permission, meaning that if one lent a neighbor money, he may not use their carriage or car seat without asking, even though he knows that he would be happy to lend it to him. Again, this is because of *maris ayin* – it looks as though he is utilizing the loan to use the borrower's possessions without permission.

**What if I lent my neighbor a couple of eggs or a liter of milk? Is it a problem now for my in-laws to stay in their apartment?**

The final exception is that one may not receive from his borrower a significant gift, even if it would have been given regardless. For example, if one lends a business associate a large sum of money, he may not send him an extremely expensive bottle of wine for *yom tov* although he does this for all his associates. The reason is that when one sees a gift like this, one's first reaction is to consider what he has done to deserve this kind of gift. Since the loan will come to mind, it is therefore perceived as *ribbis*.



### The Chasam Sofer

Rabbi Dov Loketch – Rabbi of Agudas Yisrael Mogen Avraham, Detroit

*Last week we briefly described the Chasam Sofer's place in Jewish history, and we highlighted his relationship with his foremost teacher during his early years, Rav Noson Adler.*

*This week we will hear the Chasam Sofer's recollections of how his rebbe dealt with personal tragedy, and we'll get a glimpse of the Chasam Sofer's teaching style.*

Many years later, when the Chasam Sofer was already the Rav of Pressburg, he received a request from a certain Rav Mordechai Leib to arrange for prayers to be recited at the grave of Rav Noson Adler in Frankfurt (presumably, on behalf of a family member who was ill).

The Chasam Sofer wrote a fascinating letter in response, enthusiastically pledging to fulfill the request, and adding personal recollections about his esteemed rebbe. In this letter, the Chasam Sofer related the following:

*"Now when I 'poured water over his hand' when he first arrived in Boskowitz, he had just one young son and one daughter, who was around twelve years old. She was so beloved to him through her actions. The daughter was just like her mother. Her praise is too great to be told. In our abundant sins, she died there. Yet his eye shed no tear. He proclaimed the righteousness of judgment with immense, wondrous joy, the likes of which I never saw in him even during davening on Simchas Torah.*

*But on Shabbos Parashas Vayera, he normally received the aliyos of Kohen and maftir, every Shabbos, and on that Shabbos, too, he did not abstain from this, and when he said the haftara, a single tear fell from his eyes, and he caught it with his hand. He immediately changed back completely, and never again was any hint of sorrow seen in him, and he never mentioned her name at all."*

The *haftara* for Parashas Vayera is the story told in *sefer Melachim II*, 4 of the *isha haShunamit*, the woman who generously welcomed the prophet Elisha into her home, even building a special room for him. Elisha blessed the woman – who had been married for many years without children – that she would have a son, and sure enough, she had a baby boy. Several years later, the boy went to join his father in the fields, and he suddenly died. Elisha eventually succeeded in reviving the child. Reading this story during the shiva for his beloved daughter evoked emotions of grief within Rav Noson Adler, and he shed just one tear, the only tear he shed over her





## BIOGRAPHY & LEGACY

passing, firm as he was in his *emuna*. The Chasam Sofer testified that Rav Noson immediately then composed himself, and never again displayed any anguish over this personal tragedy.

*The Chasam Sofer continues:*

*"He never had another child, and he never performed any [kabbalistic] stratagem for this. . .as he did not wish to impose upon the heavens to change nature, for this could easily cause his wife to die, Heaven forbid. And therefore, I, too, never asked him, ל"צד to ask for compassion on behalf of my first wife, ל"צד, for this reason. 'And whoever does not push the moment, the moment does not push him.' And there are many means of salvation and rescue before Him, may His name be blessed."*

Following this example, the Chasam Sofer did not ask his mentor to use such means on behalf of his first wife, who was unable to conceive and ultimately died without children.

We see a magnificent example of the *Gemara's* teaching *gedola shimushah shel Torah yoter milimudah*, attending to a talmid chacham is even more valuable than studying his Torah. The Chasam Sofer not only learned Torah from his rebbe, but carefully

watched and observed his every move.

He looked at his rebbe's eyes as he read the *haftara* each Shabbos. He watched as his rebbe ensured to catch his tear before it fell to the table or the floor. His eyes were focused so intently on Rav Noson Adler so he could learn from his every action.

### **Musar—With a Bit of Humor**

Rav Shnayer Leiman related that the Chasam Sofer once addressed the students of his yeshiva to deliver words of *musar*. He criticized them for coming to *shiur* not sufficiently prepared, for coming in late, for not properly concentrating during the *shiur*, and for not caring enough to stay afterward to clarify the material that they may have missed or not fully understood.

After saying all this, he broke into a smile and said, "You know why you are like this, while I did it right when I was learning in yeshiva? *Because I had a much greater rebbe than you do!*" The boys all let out a sigh of relief. .

This was his unique, creative way of softening the harsh message, of communicating his criticism effectively, with a touch of humor, in a manner that would not cause the *talmidim* any hard feelings.





## Letting Go

Rebbetzin Ilana Cowland

Relationships Coach and author of *The Moderately Anxious Everybody*

Control is the root character trait behind abuse. The desperate attempt to regain control stems from a deep-rooted insecurity. The less control of my life I feel I have, the more control of situations and others I feel the need to exert. I am in control externally because I feel out of control internally.

The need to control comes from a deep fear that if I lose control I will lose everything and everyone. Perhaps I was robbed of control, so I seek to reclaim it. I was controlled by others, so now I control others. Controlling people are not strong; they are anxious.

Imagine a child on a plane who refuses to let go of a toy steering wheel. The child believes that if he lets go, the plane will crash. What the child is missing is knowledge of the pilot. The child can hold on tight and miss all the pleasures of the journey because he falsely believes he is keeping the plane safe. It is not until the child is persuaded to let go that he can believe that the plane will continue to fly.

When our traumas and experiences lead us to believe that everything, including our very selves, will collapse if we don't control it, we may live an anxious and controlling life. We distance the people whom we are trying desperately to hold close. We believe no one is dependable. We lose trust in the natural recalibration of the universe when things go slightly off course. We show no faith in others.

**The need to control comes from a deep fear that if I lose control I will lose everything and everyone.**

We have invested in others being disappointing and failing without realizing that our lack of belief in them is contributing to their failure.



## EDUCATION, RELATIONSHIPS, PARENTING



We set impossible expectations to prove our theory that life will fall short and pat ourselves on the back for being prepared when it does.

While we may look like we've got it together, our entire way of being is propelled by the fear of things going wrong and perfectionist standards that mean that anything less than perfect will cause us distress.

We cannot go along with things being different than how we pictured them.

We miss out on the fun of surprises or spontaneity. We fear falling into the abyss that lurks in the gap between how things are and how we have planned them to be. We spend life's journey holding tight to a wheel not even connected to the engine.

Those of us fortunate enough to have had the wheel prized out of our hands may have discovered that, lo and behold, the plane is still flying. But for those who never had that experience, the entire journey of life will be fearful, untrusting, and disappointing.

I want you to know that you are not flying the plane. I know you don't believe me.

I'm sorry for the experiences that led you not to believe me. Those were experiences of your nurture.

But you have a deeper part of you called your nature, and it's more integral to you than the sum of your traumas. It knows there is more going on.

There is a power more in control than you, better at flying planes than you and who will hold on to the wheel when it's too much for you to manage.

**We fear falling into the abyss that lurks in the gap between how things are and how we have planned them to be.**

This power has been flying long before you and will fly long after you. That power is flying your plane right now. You'll see this should you let go. Letting go of how others should be allows us to celebrate who they are.



## EDUCATION, RELATIONSHIPS, PARENTING



Letting go of the belief that others will fail us gives them the chance to surprise us, to let them succeed, their way. Letting go of control allows us to interact with life on its terms, not ours. The way it is, is the way it is supposed to be.

We protect ourselves from mishaps and often miss out on the joys of life or miss the opportunity to learn that things do sometimes work out without our help.

***We can notice the world in which we live and notice the invitation to the meaning the world is extending to us.***

We feel alone, anxious, and reject attempts of others to love and protect us.

And if it goes off course, we may yet be okay because it may take us on an even better route than the one we had meticulously planned.

Letting go of controlling the people whose love we are so desperately trying not to lose risks losing them. This terrifies us, but it also may show us that they're not just in our lives because we have forced them but because they want to be there.

We have told ourselves that we need to stay in control because we are scared. But perhaps, when we realize how little control we actually have, we can let go of our controlling behavior. We can surrender. We can believe. We can trust. We can notice the world in which we live and notice the invitation to the meaning the world is extending to us.

An invitation that we may have missed because we are so hyper-focused on the details of our plan. We may have become controlling when we learned that the people supposedly taking care of us – a natural human desire – disappointed us. Yet that desire still exists in us. By letting go of *control*, we can fulfill our deep need to be taken care of. We can invite our Higher Power to help us to fly our plane and to take us to places we didn't even know existed.



## Choosing a Baby's Name

Josh and Tammy Kruger

### The Story

During "sharing" time in the third-grade classroom, Yishai excitedly showed all of his friends the photo he had been holding in his hand. In the photo, Yishai was sitting on the couch and holding in his lap his new baby sister wrapped up in a pink blanket.

"Tonight my parents are going to choose her name so that it can be announced in shul tomorrow!"

"How do parents choose a name?" called out a friend from the class.

The teacher turned to the classroom. "Sometimes names that parents choose are connected to the *parasha*, and sometimes names are chosen from great-grandparents or grandparents we want to remember."

Yishai laughed. "My little sister wants to name her Michelle, but I told her that the name needs to be Jewish."

"Why can't we use non-Jewish names?" protested another student. "Haven't we learned about famous Jews who had non-Jewish names?"

"Like who?" asked Yishai.

"Rav Papa..." He paused. "Also Rambam's father, Maimon.... I can't think of others, but they were really great people!"

"What difference does it make what her name is?" asked someone else.

Yishai was confused.

### Discussion

**Q:** How is this story related to our *parasha*?

**A:** There are two connections:

(1) The name of our *parasha* is *Shemos*, which means "names."

(2) After so many years of living in Egypt we might expect that the Jews would speak Egyptian to each other and give their children Egyptian names. But they made a special effort to use only Jewish names and to speak Hebrew. This is one of the reasons they merited to be rescued from Egypt (*Midrash Vayikra Rabba* 32:5).



## PARASHA HALACHA FOR THE SHABBOS TABLE

**Q:** Why do we see many examples in the Gemara of rabbis with non-Jewish names?

**A:** Before the Jews were brought out of Egypt, they didn't have many ways of distinguishing themselves from the non-Jews in order to avoid assimilation (mixing with them). After they were brought out of Egypt, they received something that helped set them apart from the non-Jews. This was the Torah! From then on, it seems that the importance of keeping their names "different" wasn't quite as vital as beforehand (*Iggros Moshe, Orach Chaim*, vol. 4, no. 64). At the time of the Gemara, for example, most of the Jews living outside of Israel had non-Jewish names (*Gittin 11*).

**Q:** Does it make a difference what someone's name is?

**A:** A person's name can have important effects on their character (*Tanchuma, Haazinu 8*). For example, the Maggid Mesharim writes that naming a baby Avraham will help him to have a desire to be generous.

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Written in collaboration with Rabbi Yehoshua Pfeffer, le'iluy nishmas Frumit bat Yosef.



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