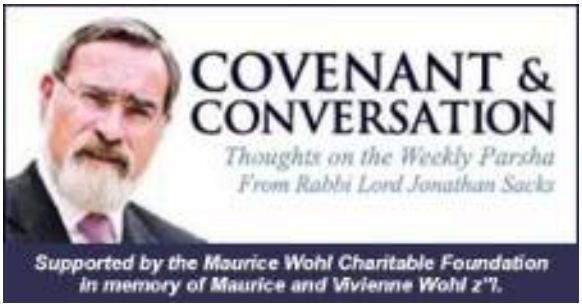
In this Issue

• **Covenant and Conversation** *by Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks*

• **M'oray Ha'Aish** *by Rabbi Ari Kahn*

• **Rabbi Frand on the Weekly Torah Portion** *by Rabbi Yissocher Frand*

• **Between the Lines** *by Rabbi Abba Wagensberg*



On Leadership: The Far Horizon

To gain insight into the unique leadership lesson of this week's parsha, I often ask an audience to perform a thought-experiment. Imagine you are the leader of a people that has suffered exile for more than two centuries, and has been enslaved and oppressed. Now, after a series of miracles, it is about to go free. You assemble them and rise to address them. They are waiting expectantly for your words. This is a defining moment they will never forget. What will you speak about?

Most people answer: freedom. That was Abraham Lincoln's decision in the Gettysburg Address when he invoked the memory of "a new nation, conceived in liberty," and looked forward to "a new birth of freedom." Some suggest that they would inspire the people by talking about the destination that lay ahead, the "land flowing with milk and honey." Yet others say they would warn the people of the dangers and challenges that they would encounter on what Nelson Mandela called "the long walk to freedom."

Any of these would have been the great speech of a great leader. Guided by God, Moses did none of these things. That is what made him a unique leader. If you examine the text in parshat Bo you will see that three times he reverted to the same theme: children, education and the distant future:

> And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this rite?" you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, because He passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt when he smote the Egyptians, but saved our houses." (Ex. 12:26-27) And you shall explain to your child on that day, "It is because of what the Lord did for me when I went free from Egypt." (Ex. 13:8) And when, in time to come, your child asks you, saying, "What does this mean?" you shall say to him, "It was with a mighty hand that the Lord brought us out from Egypt, the house of bondage." (Ex. 13:14)

It is one of the most counter-intuitive acts in the history of leadership. Moses did not speak about today or tomorrow. He spoke about the distant future and the duty of parents to educate their children. He even hinted - as Jewish tradition understood - that we should encourage our children to ask questions, so that the handing on of the Jewish heritage would be not a matter of rote learning but of active dialogue between parents and children.

So Jews became the only people in history to predicate their very survival on education. The most sacred duty of parents was to teach their children. Pesach itself became an ongoing seminar in the handing on of memory. Judaism became the religion whose heroes were teachers and whose passion was study and the life of the mind. The Mesopotamians built ziggurats. The Egyptians built pyramids. The Greeks built the Parthenon. The Romans built the Coliseum. Jews built schools. That is why they alone, of all the civilizations of the ancient world are still alive and strong, still continuing their ancestors' vocation, their heritage intact and undiminished.

Moses' insight was profound. He knew that you cannot change the world by externalities alone, by monumental architecture, or armies and empires, or the use of force and power. How many empires have come and gone while the human condition remains untransformed and unredeemed?

There is only one way to change the world, and that is by education. You have to teach children the importance of justice, righteousness, kindness and compassion. You have to teach them that freedom can only be sustained by the laws and habits of self-restraint. You have continually to remind them of the

lessons of history, "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt," because those who forget the bitterness of slavery eventually lose the commitment and courage to fight for freedom. And you have to empower children to ask, challenge and argue. You have to respect them if they are to respect the values you wish them to embrace.

This is a lesson most cultures still have not learned after more than three thousand years. Revolutions, protests and civil wars still take place, encouraging people to think that removing a tyrant or having a democratic election will end corruption, create freedom, and lead to justice and the rule of law - and still people are surprised and disappointed when it does not happen. All that happens is a change of faces in the corridors of power.

In one of the great speeches of the 20th century, a distinguished American justice, Judge Learned Hand, said:

> I often wonder whether we do not rest our hopes too much upon constitutions, upon laws and upon courts. These are false hopes; believe me, these are false hopes. Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it. (1)

What God taught Moses was that the real challenge does not lie in gaining freedom; it lies in sustaining it, keeping the spirit of liberty alive in the hearts of successive generations. That can only be done through a sustained process of education. Nor is this something that can be delegated away to teachers and schools. Some of it has to take place within the family, at home, and with the sacred obligation that comes from religious duty. No one ever saw this more clearly than Moses, and only because of his teachings have Jews and Judaism survived.

What makes leaders great is that they think ahead, worrying not about tomorrow but about next year, or the next decade, or the next generation. In one of his finest speeches Robert F. Kennedy spoke of the power of leaders to transform the world when they have a clear vision of a possible future:

> Some believe there is nothing one man or one woman can do against the enormous array of the world's ills -- against misery, against ignorance, or injustice and violence. Yet many of the world's great movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single man. A young monk began the Protestant reformation, a young general extended an empire from Macedonia to the borders of the earth, and a young woman reclaimed the territory of France. It was a young Italian explorer who discovered the New World, and 32 year old Thomas Jefferson who proclaimed that all men are created equal. 'Give me a place to stand,' said Archimedes, 'and I will move the world.' These men moved the world, and so can we all." (2)

Visionary leadership forms the text and texture of Judaism. It was the book of Proverbs that said, "Without a vision [*chazon*] the people perish." (Prov. 29:18). That vision in the minds of the prophets was always of a long term future. God told Ezekiel that a prophet is a watchman, one who climbs to a high vantage-point and so can see the danger in the distance, before anyone else is aware of it at ground level (Ezek. 33:1-6). The sages said, "Who is wise? One who sees the long-term consequences [*ha-nolad*]." (3) Two of the greatest leaders of the twentieth century, Churchill and Ben Gurion, were also distinguished historians. Knowing the past, they could anticipate the future. They were like chess masters who, because they have studied thousands of games, recognise almost immediately the dangers and possibilities in any configuration of the pieces on the board. They know what will happen if you make this move or that.

If you want to be a great leader in any field, from Prime Minister to parent, it is essential to think long-term. Never choose the easy option because it is simple or fast or yields immediate satisfaction. You will pay a high price in the end.

Moses was the greatest leader because he thought further ahead than anyone else. He knew that real change in human behaviour is the work of many generations. Therefore we must place as our highest priority educating our children in our ideals so that what we begin they will continue until the world changes because we have changed. He knew that if you plan for a year, plant rice. If you plan for a decade, plant a tree. If you plan for posterity, educate

a child.(4) Moses' lesson, thirty-three centuries old, is still compelling today.

1. The Spirit of Liberty" - speech at "I Am an American Day" ceremony, Central Park, New York City (21 May 1944).

2. The Kennedys: America's Front Page Family, 112.

3. Tamid 32a.

4. A statement attributed to Confucius.

Signs

Seven plagues have been endured by the Egyptians, and presumably it is time for the eighth plague. Moshe is instructed to "Come to Pharoh". The language seems strange; we would have expected the command to have been "Go to Pharoh". What follows makes things even less clear: The purpose of this visit is not revealed. Rather than a specific message to the Egyptian monarch, a more general message of God's dominion is transmitted:

> God said to Moshe, 'Come to Pharaoh for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants, so that I will be able to demonstrate these miraculous signs among them. And so that you will be able to tell your children and grandchildren what I have wrought upon Egypt, and My miraculous signs which I have performed among them, and you will then fully comprehend that I am God.'(Shmot 10:2-3)

God does not tell Moshe the nature or method of the coming plague. Rather, the rationale for the entire "system" of the plagues is revealed. Nonetheless, Moshe understands that another plague is in the offing, and that the purpose of visiting Pharoh is to warn of the impending disaster which will soon befall the Egyptian people. Despite the absence of this warning in God's instructions, Moshe knows what to do.[1]

> Moshe and Aharon came to Pharaoh and they said to him, 'Thus said God, Lord of the Hebrews, 'How long will you refuse to submit to Me? Let My people leave that they may serve Me. For if you refuse to let My people leave, tomorrow I will bring locusts within your borders. (Shmot 10:3-4)

Rashi explains that the strange opening words of the parsha, "come to Pharoh," contain this warning to Pharoh: "Come to Pharoh - and warn him". Rashi thus resolves two problems: the inexplicable use of "come" rather than "go" is a marker for text left inexplicit - the warning that Moshe actually gives Pharoh. This warning, which could not have been a private initiative of Moshe's, was, in Rashi's view, transmitted by God to Moshe, either literally or by inference.

While the warning is absent in God's instructions to Moshe, Rashi assumes it was, in fact, part of what God said to Moshe at that juncture. While the casual reader might assume that Rashi's comments are apologetic, that he has taken the liberty to "correct" an untenable "mistake" in the text, in truth, it may be demonstrated that Rashi's comments are far more systematic. He allows himself the latitude necessary to assume that God transmitted a warning, which was not recorded in the text, based on the pattern discernable among the plagues.

The plague of locusts is not merely one more arbitrary, random occurrence. Each of the Ten Plagues was part and parcel of a series of attacks which posses an inner logic. Each plague should be seen as one specific tactic within a larger strategy. This systematic approach is not new to those of us familiar with the Passover Haggadah. In a Rabbinicic tradition popularized in the Haggadah,[2] Rabbi Yehuda divides the ten plagues into three groups, consisting respectively of three, three and four plagues, or perhaps three, three, three and one (the final plague may be a category unto itself):

1. Blood

2. Frogs

3. Lice

Using this analytic device and dividing the first nine plagues into groups of three, we are able to discern certain patterns or characteristics of the system as a whole.

First, we will note similarities between the first, second and third plague of each respective group. This method forces us to recognize that the "strange" phrase 'come to Pharoh' is not unique to the eighth plague. As our system dictates, this same phrase introduces the second plague in each of the sub-sets (the plague of frogs, second in the order of plagues and second of the first set, as well as pestilence, the fifth in the order of plagues, second in the second set). Interestingly, the first plague of each set (blood, #1; wild beasts, #4; hail, #7) is introduced by the words 'go to Pharoh," precisely as we would expect in the case of all of the plagues. What is the difference between these two turns of phrase? Reading the text with careful attention to context, it becomes clear that whenever "come" is used, the destination is the palace. Whenever "go" is used, the destination is the Nile.[3]

For the Egyptians generally, and Pharoh in particular, the Nile represented power. The Nile was the life force of Egypt.

> 'Son of man, confront Pharoh, King of Egypt, and prophesy regarding him, and all of Egypt. Speak, and say: Thus said the L-rd GOD: behold, I am above you, Pharaoh King of Egypt, the great dragon that lies in the midst of his rivers, that has said: My river is mine, and I have made it for myself. (Yechezkel 29:2-3)

The Nile was considered a physical representation of the power of Pharoh, a power fueled by delusions of grandeur and steeped in pagan rituals and beliefs. It is therefore of particular interest that the first plague of each "triplet" was announced at the Nile, at the epicenter of this contrived, self-absorbed world, headquarters of Egypt's cultic activity. In each such instance, God instructs Moshe to "go" - without Him, as it were. Even though God is Omnipresent, filling all of His creation, and there can be no place devoid of His presence, the text "leaves God out of the frame" in the scenes that unfold in the place of pagan worship.[4] There, Moshe and Aharon are sent alone.[5] Notwithstanding God's assurance when Moshe was hesitant to accept his role as savior ("I will be with you"), God's Presence is hidden in places of pagan ritual observance.

As we have seen, the second plague in each group of three is characterized by the phrase "come to Pharoh". Here, the meaning may be more accurately expressed as "come *with me* to Pharoh". In this case, the implication is that God will accompany Moshe. The destination is the palace, and we are to understand that God is manifest at these meetings.

Regarding the third plague of each set, there is no warning: Pharoh is no longer involved.[6]

Thus we see that Rabbi Yehuda's system of breaking the plagues into groups of three is more than a convenient mnemonic device to help us remember the plagues in their proper order. The similarities and differences between the plagues take on new significance when the pattern is discerned. However, this system goes even further, affording deeper insight into the nature of the plagues themselves, and the entire process of leaving Egypt.

The first plague of each set (blood, wild beasts and hail) may be seen as an invasion of Egyptian territory. Most notably, in the first plague the Nile itself was struck; the image of the Egyptian life-force bleeding was certainly not lost on the pagan Egyptians. These three plagues were an annoyance; the Egyptians were made to feel uncomfortable in a general sense, but were more of a public than a private nuisance as compared to the third plague in each triplet. The third plague of each set (lice, boils, blinding darkness) came without warning, neither at the banks of the Nile nor in the palace. They simply arrived. These third plagues were a punishment for ignoring the first two in each triplet, hence no warning and no chance to reverse or avoid the punishment was offered.[7] These three plagues were personal afflictions, visited upon each and every Egyptian.

Rav Shimshon ben Raphael Hirsch[8] explains that the first plague in each triplet was designed to make the Egyptians feel like strangers in their own land, upending the most basic governing principles that ordered their world. The second plague in each triplet was designed to counter the feeling of superiority that lies at the core of being a slave-owner. These plagues were most closely involved with possessions (the frogs infested the Egyptians' homes and spoiled their bread, the pestilence killed their herds, and the locusts wiped out their crops). The third plague of each group was essentially different: There were lessons to be learned from the first two plagues in each set - moral lessons, social values, philosophical tenets. The third plague in each set was a punishment for having neglected to heed the lessons of the two preceding plagues, and therefore each of these plagues contains an element of physical torture.

When Moshe and Aharon were sent to perform the first in each group of plagues, we understand why they were "sent". Regarding the third plague in each group, no warning was forthcoming. But is there something objectively different about the nature of the second plague in each group, where God invites Moshe to join him, "come to Pharoh"? What was the purpose of such an invitation? Was there something about these plagues that made it appropriate for them to be initiated at the place? Moreover, as the plagues progress, why is Moshe allowed to continue to come to the palace and torment the monarch? The Ohr Hachaim Hakadosh points out that Pharoh and the palace were surely well protected; the fact that Moshe walked in unmolested is part of what intimidated Pharoh. Moshe did not seek permission; he entered unannounced. Pharoh's bodyguards quivered, his guard dogs whimpered, and this only added to Pharoh's humiliation.[9]

This abrupt treatment of Pharoh is not echoed by all commentaries. Rashi, for one, was of the opinion that Pharoh should be treated with respect.[10] Rabbi Soloveitchik followed this line of reasoning and took it a few steps further. He explained that there was a schism running through the personality of Pharoh. While he was certainly an evil despot, he was also something else: a person, a human being, a father. Even Pharoh was created in God's image:

> "Bo el Paroh" (come to Pharoh) is different from the wording used in the Torah in Sedra Va'era when G-d sent Moshe to confront Pharoh for the first plague of blood at the Nile River. There, we find the word lech (go)... The words bo or lech are characteristic of the message... Moshe was told to approach Pharoh as the emperor and also to approach "another" Pharoh: the private person, the individual. When he approached Pharoh as the king [lech el Paroh], he met him at the Nile, the symbol of power in Egypt. "Address yourself to the power-oriented Pharoh at the source of power, the Nile. Stop him; block him. Tell him there are forces stronger (than he). Place yourself strongly in front of him and protest!" [Elsewhere], we find the word bo used: "Go into the king in [his home] ... whe[re] he is an ordinary man, a person, a father. Tell him how wrong it is to throw a child into the water. Tell him about Avraham, about morality. Perhaps he will respond." There is a spark of good even in the most wicked. We use the word bo when we ask someone to come closer.11 (Rabbi Yosef Dov Soloveitchik)

There are times that require confrontation, challenge, even battle. There are times that require a different approach, a person-to-person approach, an appeal to the other's sense of decency. The plan regarding Pharoh was a dual plan: He was challenged publicly, his beloved Nile turned to blood, and he was approached privately, when he could let his guard down, when his subjects were not watching, when he might be persuaded to do the right thing.

Judaism believes that every mortal king's rule is a gift from God; hence, the blessing one recites when seeing a king: "Blessed are You, God, King of the Universe, who has given of His glory to flesh and blood." [12] In his palace, away from the corrupt, delusional pagan cult of the Nile, Pharoh was treated with respect, treated as a king. God, as it were, accompanied Moshe to the palace, and together they attempted to connect with the *tzelem Elokim* hiding inside Pharoh the man. Moshe reached out to a man who may have been to him as a father or brother. During his early years, had Moshe spoken to this man about morals, beliefs, aspirations? Had they discussed Moshe's emerging sense of identity, his spiritual awakening? Now, Moshe spoke with him again, hoping to strike a chord buried deep within. Instead, Moshe found a man who had deaf ears and a hardened heart. His pleas went unheeded. Pharoh was offered the opportunity to rise above, to respond with the greatness and grandeur befitting all children of God, especially a king.

Sadly, Pharoh did not respond to this type of plea any more than he did to intimidation or to fear. Striking the Nile made no impression on him; when the curtain was drawn back and he was revealed to all as a man, not a god or a wizard, he did not succumb. Words spoken to his very humanity, in the palace, in his home where his children laughed and played, in the presence of his Creator and true source of his dominion, did not sway him. Consequently, he lost not only his slaves, but his kingdom. The stage for the tenth, most tragic plague, was set by Pharoh's own intransigence, and he would lose everything.

1. The Ktav V'kabalah (Shmot 10:1) explains that the torah does not record the entire conversation, but God did say more to Moshe that what is recorded.

2. The earliest source for this teaching is found in the Sifri Parshat Ki Tavo section 5.

3. See Baal Haturim, Shmot 10:1.

4. See comments of Daat Zkeinim M'baalei Hatosfot, Shmot 8:16.

5. In the first and fourth plagues, the text specifically refers to the Nile. In the case of the eighth plague, this context is inferred: In the fourth plague (8:16), the text reads, "God said to Moshe, 'Get up early in the morning, and confront Pharoh when he goes out to the water." Getting up early was necessary, for that was the time that Pharoh went to the Nile. In the seventh plague the word Nile is missing, "9:13 God told Moshe to get up early in the morning and confront Pharaoh," but Moshe is told to get up early, presumably again to go to the Nile. See comments of the Ramban on Shmot 8:15.

6. See comments of Rashbam Shmot 7:26.

7. Many commentaries make this observation. See Chizkuni Shmot 8:15, Commentary of the Baali Hatosfot 7:25, Commentary of the Rosh 6:3, Rabbenu Bachya 10:1.

8. Commentary of Rav Shimshon ben Raphael Hirsch on Shmot 7:15.

9. Ohr Hachaim, Shmot 9:1.

10. See Rashi Shmot 6:13.

11. From a public lecture delivered in January, 1975.

12. See Shulchan Oruch, Orach Chaim, Section 224, based on Talmud Bavli Brachot 58a.

The Message of the Firstborn

The last and most spectacular of the plagues was the plague of the firstborn, during which Hashem skipped over every Jewish firstborn and slew every Egyptian firstborn. Because of this miracle, the firstborn of the Jewish people, human and animal, are forever sanctified. Originally, the firstborn were to be the priests who performed the holy service in the *Beis Hamikdash*, but they lost this privilege when they sinned with the Golden Calf. Nonetheless, despite their fall from grace, the firstborn still remained sanctified regarding *pidyon haben*, firstborn animals and other observances.

Rav Simchah Zissel, the Alter of Kelm, once wrote a letter to Baron Rothschild, praising him for his exertions on behalf of the Jewish people. In this letter, Rav Simchah Zissel raises an interesting question. What did the Jewish firstborn do in Egypt to earn this high level of sanctification? True, they were involved in a great *kiddush Hashem*, but did they do anything at all to make it happen? They contributed nothing to their rescue during the plague. They also had nothing to do with their being born first. Everything happened without their involvement and assistance. Their role was absolutely passive.

Clearly, even passive participation in a *kiddush Hashem* is a very great thing. A person gains tremendous merit if Hashem chooses him to play a role in a *kiddush Hashem*, even if it is only a passive role.

"If this is the reward for a person who has a passive role in a *kiddush Hashem*," wrote Rav Simchah Zissel, "how can we even begin to imagine the reward of a person that actively makes a *kiddush Hashem*? You, Baron Rothschild, considering who you are and what you have done, have actively and publicly sanctified the Name of Hashem, and there is no limit to the honor, respect and gratitude you have earned."

This is the lesson we must all draw from the mitzvah of *pidyon haben*. If a passive contribution to a *kiddush Hashem* sanctified the firstborn, we can be sure that an active contribution would certainly provide at least such a level of sanctification if not a greater one. And the opportunities are always there for us. We can make a *kiddush Hashem* in the way we conduct our daily lives, the way we walk, the way we talk, the way we negotiate, the way we do business, the way we treat other people, both Jewish and non-Jewish. It is within our power to cause people who observe us to remark (*Yoma* 86a), "Look at him! Look how beautifully a religious Jew behaves." This is such an easy way to make a *kiddush Hashem*, such an easy way to gain tremendous reward both in this world and the next.

One of the rules of pidyon haben is that only the natural firstborn of the mother is sanctified as a *bechor*, a holy firstborn. If the child is the first for the father but not for the mother, or if he is delivered by caesarean section, he is not a *bechor*.

Let us think for a moment. What is the reason for the mitzvah of *bechor*? It reminds us that Hashem skipped over the Jewish firstborn while He was slaying the Egyptian firstborn. Now, the Talmud tells

us specifically that Hashem slew all the firstborn of Egypt, both the firstborn for the mother and the firstborn for the father or any other way they can be construed as a firstborn. If so, shouldn't the mitzvah of *bechor* also extend to both the firstborn for the mother and the firstborn for the father?

The Avnei Shoham offers a solution based on an analogy to the mitzvah of *bikurim*, the offering of the first fruits. What is the purpose of bringing the first fruits? The Torah tells us (*Devarim* 8:17-18), "And you may say in your heart, 'My power and the strength of my hand created all this wealth.' Then you shall remember Hashem your Lord, for He is the One that gives you the power to create wealth."

A person can easily fall into the trap of thinking that everything comes to him naturally. He planted the seed. He nurtured it. The tree grew. It gave fruit. It was all natural, with no involvement from Hashem. But when we bring the first fruits to the *Beis Hamikdash* we are reminded that the most natural process still requires the miraculous intervention of Hashem, that we are always dependent on Divine providence no matter how naturally everything seems to be coming our way.

The mitzvah of *bechor* has a similar message. When we have a firstborn child, we may easily fall into the same trap. When people have all sorts of trouble having a child, they turn to Hashem and plead with him. And when the child is finally born, they know full well that it is a priceless gift from Hashem. But when things go normally, they may not realize that the child is just as great a gift from Hashem. People get married, they have a child, and they think: What could be more normal, more natural? They forget that they owe Hashem an enormous debt of gratitude. This is the role of the mitzvah of *bechor*. It reminds them that Hashem spread a protective wing over all the firstborn Jewish children in Egypt. Just as those firstborns were a Divine gift to their parents, so are all the firstborns and all other children for all generations.

The Torah, however, chooses to give us this reminder only when everything goes normally and naturally, because that is when we are most likely to forget that we have to thank Hashem. We are less likely to make this mistake when things do not go with the greatest smoothness, and therefore, the Torah does not deem a reminder necessary.

When a child is the firstborn to his mother by natural birth, everything has indeed gone as expected. But when he is the firstborn only to his father and not to his mother, something has obviously gone off the track. The mother may have had a child by a previous marriage that didn't work out. If the child was born by caesarean section, it is also a deviation from the normal and natural. In such cases, we are already painfully aware that our fate is in Hashem's hands, and we don't need the mitzvah of *bechor* to remind us of it.

Who Are We Serving?

Greetings from the holy city of Jerusalem!

This week's Torah reading says:

> "When your children ask you: 'What is the nature of this service to you?' you shall say: 'It is the sacrifice of God's Passover.' " (Exodus 12:26)

In the Passover Haggadah, we read about four sons, and we find that the wicked son asks this exact question.

The commentator Kli Yakar explains the real question of this wicked child. He is asking, "What is this service *lachem* (for you)?" In other words, the wicked son thinks that the whole reason we eat the Passover offering is for our own sake. We are doing it because it tastes good, because we enjoy it!

We find a proof for this when God tells Abraham: *"Lech lecha m'artezcha"* (Genesis 12:1), which means "go for yourself from your land." Based on the Midrash, Rashi explains: "Go for your own pleasure." God is promising Abraham wealth, fame, and power. The word *"lecha"* means "for your benefit and pleasure."

So too, in our case, the word *"lachem"* (the plural of *lecha*) means the same thing. The wicked son it asking: "what is this service *lachem*?" It is for your own enjoyment. He says: "Stop kidding yourselves into thinking that you are doing the will of God. You are really just hiding behind your religiosity as you

go about fulfilling your own desires." The wicked son simply cannot understand how it is possible to do things that are pleasurable completely for the sake of Heaven.

Sure, we want to serve God better and improve ourselves. Yet, how can we know if what we are doing is really for God, or because of some ulterior motive? Maybe we do it all for our own sakes. Even when it comes to Torah and mitzvot, maybe we are thinking, "What's in it for me?"

This is a serious question which we have to ask ourselves. This is what bothers the wicked son.

LITMUS TEST

The Ba'al Shem Tov offers three pieces of advice to help clarify whether we are really serving God or ourselves:

1. Remove all pleasure.

2. Meditation.

3. The light of God.

To explain: The Ba'al Shem Tov first recommends that we imagine that all pleasure has been removed from a mitzvah. In reality, it is a good thing to derive pleasure from mitzvot, but for the purposes of this exercise we should imagine that we have no taste buds and we're not getting anything out of eating matzah. Would we still spend the time, effort and money to do this mitzvah? We have to honestly ask ourselves this question. If the answer is "yes," this is an indication that we are indeed doing it completely for God.

The Ba'al Shem Tov gives the second piece of advice: We need to ask ourselves whether what we are about to do is really a mitzvah. One should meditate and consider that maybe the *opposite* of what you are about to do is the really the will of God. It requires patience before we jump to do a mitzvah. Are we really doing it for the sake of God, or for ourselves?

The Ba'al Shem Tov gives us the third piece of advice on how to check our motives. He calls it "the light of God." Sometimes after we have removed all pleasure, and we have done some deep meditation, we still find ourselves in the dark and can't decide what to do. At that time we need God to reveal Himself, and light the path for us. God hid His light in the Torah, and that is where we can access it. We have to turn to the Torah, or to those who know the Torah, for guidance.

LESSONS FROM THE PLAGUES

We could suggest that the Ba'al Shem Tov's three pieces of advice correspond to the three plagues mentioned in this week's parsha. The numerical value of the name *"Bo"* is also three. Three plagues are placed in this week's parsha, separate from the other seven, because they correspond to the three pieces of advice, as follows:

First came the plague of locusts, which removed all pleasure. They ate up all the food in the land. Then came the plague of darkness, which was the perfect opportunity for meditation, for asking oneself, "Am I living by what I want to do, or by what God wants me to do?"

Then came the final plague, the Death of the Firstborn. This came in the middle of the night, and in that darkness God revealed himself. He passed over the homes where Jews were eating the Passover lamb, for the sake of Heaven. Those who perished were those who fooled themselves into thinking that they were really doing the will of God, but in reality they were basically serving themselves. The light of God made the truth clear.

May we all have the clarity to know the true path, so that we are not fooled by the *yetzer hara,* who sometimes tries to paint negativity as something spiritual. And may we merit to see the light in the darkness, all the days of our lives.