

**Torah From a Mussar Perspective**  
***Parshat Shemot* – Exodus 1:1 – 6:1**  
**Rabbi Eric S. Gurvis**

As has so often been the case over the years, I begin studying a portion with a particular focus and then real-time events suggest something else is more relevant. Such has been the case as I opened the book of *Shemot* last week, thinking about what I might share from a *Mussar* perspective for this week.

So much is drawing our attention at this time: the ongoing conflict in the Middle East and the news of a deal to release at least some of the hostages; conflicts in other corners of our world; an important leadership transition taking place in the United States early next week; and the wildfires and the destruction that have been faced by so many in Southern California over recent days. Our hearts and prayers are with those who have lost their homes, and with all whose lives have been torn asunder amidst the horror unfolding in Southern California.

It is hard to watch the unfolding tragedy in Southern California, and not hear the cries, and feel the pain, anguish, and sense of loss so many are facing. This includes cherished members of our TMI community. Grappling with this horrific reality, albeit from afar, I feel a measure of the very real disorientation (surely too mild a word) our family and friends are feeling. So, while I may have set out to comment on a different piece of *Parshat Shemot*, following the news out of California, my focus shifted.

In Exodus 2:23-25 we read:

A long time after that, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out; and their cry for help from the bondage rose up to God. God heard their moaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. God looked upon the Israelites, and God took notice of them.

Commenting on the words, *Va-yeda Elohim* – “And God knew,” Rashi comments: “God directed the Divine heart to them and did not hide the Divine eyes from them.” No matter what our personal theological beliefs may be, we want to believe that God is aware of the suffering of so many at this time. Without a doubt, this is a time when *bitachon*/trust – from a traditional Mussar perspective, trust in God, is tested. At the same time, our *Ba’alei Mussar*, as well as our broader Jewish tradition teaches us that God is present with us, even when we find ourselves in difficult situations.

A bit later than Rashi, Nachmanides, comments on these same verses, emphasizes the power of verse 24 above, stating: “Scripture gives a lengthy account of the many reasons for their redemption [from slavery in Egypt]: *And God heard their groaning, and God remembered the covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob; And God saw the children of Israel, and God knew; For I know their pains. . .*”

Most of us can only imagine how those suffering from the devastation surrounding them, and the uncertainties they are facing would love to know that God is hearing their cries and seeing the devastation they are facing. For those in the midst of these horrifying tragedies, *bitachon*/trust, and *emnuah*/faith must be a challenge!

In *Shiurei Chumash Shemot*,<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe offers this perspective on the our verses, teaching,

This *parasha* is one of *Geulah*/redemption. [We can see here] two aspects<sup>2</sup> of the Creator: *Hester panim*/the hiddenness of God's Divine Countenance, and *Ha'arat Panim*/the showing of God's Divine Countenance.

*Hester Panim*/the concealment of God's Countenance can feel as if God does not know and does not hear. Is this not what is spoken of in Deuteronomy 31:17: "I will abandon them and hide My countenance from them . . . [and hence] many evils and troubles shall befall them." [When we experience] *hester panim*/the concealment of the Divine Countenance, it can feel very much as if there is a willingness to allow destruction, and [it can feel] and as if the Creator of the Universe does not know . . .

[On the other hand] *Ha'arat Panim*/the revealing of God's Divine Countenance displays that demonstrates that God hears, sees and knows . . . When we see [or feel] this aspect [of God's leadership], it must be *Geulah*/Redemption.

I have little doubt that those in harm's way and fleeing destruction, wherever it may be taking place, surely wish to perceive that the Creator of the Universe hears, sees, and knows what is happening. Some surely want to believe that the Creator will act. Strong *Bitachon*/Trust and *Emunah*/Faith can bolster those who find themselves in dire straits.

As has been the case in the face of other moments of devastation and tragedy, even as I wrestle with *Bitachon* and *Emunah*, I find my focus turns in another direction. This has been quite true in the face of the recent horrors as well. Rather than just look to heaven, or perhaps only to heaven for answers, I take solace and place hope in the actions of the many who are racing to address the suffering of others. I cannot help but admire the actions of the first responders who are battling the flames, and those who are working day and night to rescue people from the devastation. I cannot help but see hope in those who are sheltering and feeding those who have lost their homes and so much more. As was the case amidst the horrors of 9-11, or more recently in other moments of natural disaster, such as hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis and earthquakes – as well as the all-too-often wildfires of recent years, I am looking to those bearing

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<sup>1</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Shiurei Chumash Shemot*, page 23

<sup>2</sup> Rav Wolbe uses the Hebrew word *hanhagah*, which may be translated either as leadership, in the sense of God as a *manhig*/leader; or alternatively as referring to behavior.

*Tzelem Elohim*/the image of God, who are working feverously to assist and rescue others who bear that image as well in this time of pain, fear, uncertainty and loss.

Literally this morning, while studying a passage from another of Rabbi Wolbe's works, *Pirkei Kinyan Da'at* during our weekly *hevruta* study, my partner and I came upon a short passage from Rav Wolbe that had me sit up and take notice. He writes in this slender volume of teachings, "Our Holy Torah teaches us to see the whole of creation. [We must never look only at] half of a thing."<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Wolbe teaches of the necessity for us to strive to bridge Heaven and Earth. For him, the point of connection is when we pursue the acquisition of *Da'at*/ Knowledge.<sup>4</sup> Rav Wolbe speaks of how we view and live in our world making the connection between the physical and the spiritual, by means of which we can bridge Heaven and Earth. In quieter moments, when life is calm and we are not facing, as so many are in our time-threatening circumstances, we can approach this concept from a spiritual dimension as we seek to become the best version of ourselves through our study and practice of *Mussar*. However, in a *Sha'at Dachuf* – a moment of crisis and pressure, we cannot merely sit and study, reflect and work on the spiritual. We must act, which Rav Wolbe urges us to do as he speaks of the importance of *ma'aseh*/deeds, actions, which draw Heaven and Earth closer, thereby building the world our Creator teaches us to create here.

In a very real sense, I see this in the actions of those who are racing to assist those in harm's way. And I see it in the opportunities that we, who may be at a distance, have to share resources, as well as words of *nichum*/comfort and *gevurah*/strength to those who lives have been upended.

My teacher, Rabbi Irving "Yitz" Greenberg teaches powerfully of the importance of our tradition's concept of *Tzelem Elohim*. Indeed, in his most recent book, *The Triumph of Life* he writes:

The Jewish religion enters the existing world with a teaching and a mission. The teaching is about the unseen, sustaining, loving God who is committed to perfecting this world to the point where life is prevalent everywhere and sustained in all its fullness. The mission is for humanity to join with the Creator, who has reached out to us, as partners to make this happen . . .

The goal of this partnership is nothing less than achieving the victory of life over all opposing forces that destroy, degrade, or undermine it. Collectively, all of humanity is called on to work to reduce the agents of counterlife, and to develop life-sustaining resources by repairing what is functioning the wrong way.

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<sup>3</sup> Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, *Pirkei Kinyan Da'at*, page 24

<sup>4</sup> By *Da'at* Rav Wolbe is speaking of a higher dimension of knowledge than just knowledge of facts. As our teacher, Rabbi Avi Fertig has taught in his course on Rav Wolbe's masterwork, *Alei Shur*, it is high priority to strive to become a *Bar Da'at*- one who attains the lofty ideal of a higher plane of *Da'at*.

Collectively, all humans are instructed to recreate their societies so that these collectives uphold life as they fully honor the dignities of all beings and deepen the quality of life for all.”<sup>5</sup>

May the devastation be arrested in the nearness of time, and all be brought to safety and security. May we each reach within to discern how we can act in partnership with the Holy Creator, and with others to bring healing, comfort, hope and wholeness to those whose lives and homes have been “broken.”

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<sup>5</sup> Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg, *The Triumph of Life* [2024], page 48