בס"ד

17 JANUARY 2026 | 28 TEVET 5786

VOLUME 39 | #19

DAF HASHAVUA

וָאֵרָא | VA'ERA

SHABBAT ENDS:

London: 5.16pm
Birmingham: 5.20pm
Bournemouth: 5.29pm
Cardiff: 5.32pm
Dublin: 5.34pm
Edinburgh: 5.14pm
Glasgow: 5.20pm
Hull: 5.15pm
Leeds: 5.14pm
Liverpool: 5.26pm
Manchester: 5.20pm
Nottingham: 5.20pm
Sheffield: 5.20pm
Southend: 5.12pm
Southport: 5.26pm
Jerusalem: 5.39pm

Shabbat Mevarechim

Rosh Chodesh Shevat is on Monday

"Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt... and they shall become blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt" ***(Shemot 7:19)***

The United Synagogue

SIDRA BREAKDOWN

וָאֵרָא
VA'ERA

2nd Sidra in:
שְׁמוֹת
SHEMOT

By Numbers:
121 VERSES
1,748 WORDS
6,701 LETTERS

Headlines:
SEVEN OF THE TEN PLAGUES

VA'ERA:
Artscroll p.318
Hertz p.232
Koren Sacks p.389
Soncino p.351

HAFTARAH:
Artscroll p.1149
Hertz p.244
Koren Sacks p.1461
Soncino p.372

SIDRA SUMMARY

1ST ALIYA (KOHEN) – SHEMOT 6:2-6:13
God reassures Moshe (Moses) that He will keep His promise to the forefathers to bring the nation into the Land of Cana'an (later Israel). God has heard the crying out of the enslaved Israelites; He instructs Moshe to tell them that He will redeem them from slavery. The Israelites, exhausted from their labour, do not accept Moshe's reassurances.

2ND ALIYA (LEVI) – 6:14-6:28
The Torah details the genealogy of Moshe and Aharon (Aaron). They are the sons of Amram and Yocheved, who were both descendants of Levi, the third son of Yaakov (Jacob).

Point to Consider: *Why does the Torah break from the previous narrative to discuss this genealogy? (6:14)*

3RD ALIYA (SHLISHI) – 6:29-7:7
Moshe re-expresses his reluctance to speak to Pharaoh, given his speech impediment. God restates that Aharon will be Moshe's spokesman. God will harden Pharaoh's heart and He will send plagues. This will make Egypt aware of God's omnipotence.

4TH ALIYA (REVI'I) – 7:8-8:6
Upon God's command, Aharon throws down his stick in front of Pharaoh; it turns into a snake. Pharaoh's magicians duplicate this. However, Aharon's stick swallows up their sticks. The 1st Plague: Moshe and Aharon confront Pharaoh while he is bathing in the Nile and warn him that if he does not let the Israelites leave, the waters of Egypt will turn to blood. Pharaoh ignores the warning; Aharon strikes the water with a stick and it turns into blood. Pharaoh's magicians duplicate this. The plague lasts a week. (This pattern follows for most of the rest of the plagues – three weeks of warning and a week of plague – see Rashi's commentary.) The 2nd Plague: Aharon strikes the waters of the Nile. A plague of frogs emerges, which covers Egypt. Pharaoh asks Moshe to pray for the frogs to die.

5TH ALIYA (CHAMISHI) – 8:7-8:18
The 3rd Plague: Aharon strikes the ground with his stick and lice spread all over Egypt. The Egyptian magicians fail to duplicate this, admitting it is the 'finger of God'.

6TH ALIYA (SHISHI) – 8:19-9:17
The 4th Plague: A plague of wild beasts spreads over Egypt, apart from Goshen, where the Israelites live. Pharaoh agrees to let the Israelites leave for three days to bring offerings in the desert. Moshe prays for the plague to stop but Pharaoh reneges on his promise. The 5th Plague: The Egyptian livestock is killed, but the Israelites' animals are untouched. The 6th Plague: Moshe throws a fistful of ash in the sky. This turns into dust covering all of Egypt, which then turns into boils on the Egyptians and their animals. God hardens Pharaoh's heart.

7TH ALIYA (SHEVI'I) – 9:18-9:35
The 7th Plague: A fiery hail falls on all of Egypt, apart from Goshen. Pharaoh admits that he has sinned and that God is righteous. After Moshe has prayed for the hail to stop, Pharaoh refuses to let the Israelites go.

HAFTARAH (YECHEZKEL 28:25-29:21)
The prophet Yechezkel (Ezekiel) prophesies about the downfall of the future Egyptian empire, after Israel will have mistakenly relied upon them as an ally. Egypt will be invaded by the Babylonian leader Nebuchadnezzar.

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EMERGING FROM TRAUMA

BY: **RABBI BARUCH DAVIS**
Editor-in-Chief, Daf Hashavua

Many Israelis and foreign workers and their families – not only the hostages – are suffering enduring trauma since the terrible events of Simchat Torah 27 months ago. This of course includes many thousands of soldiers who were on the battlefield for many months. They and their families suffered from being apart, and from the fear of the soldiers themselves not returning home. Many also struggled with readjusting to normal life in between times.

Our *sidra*, which contains the first seven of the ten plagues, begins the process of Israel's redemption from Egypt. It contains the four expressions of redemption, where God instructed Moshe (Moses) to inform the *Bnei Yisrael*, Israelites: "I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt; I will rescue you from their servitude; I will redeem you; I will take you to Me as a people" (*Shemot* 6:6-7). The Netziv (Rabbi Naftali Tzvi Yehuda Berlin, 1816-1893) sees these expressions as a gradual easing of the conditions of their slavery and oppression, until their complete freedom. "It is impossible", he says, "for a slave toiling in bricks and mortar to suddenly become, in a short time, a spiritually elevated Israelite prepared to stand at Sinai and receive the Torah amidst awe and Divine revelation. A person must have his mind and character elevated gradually."

In other words, long years of slavery have taken their toll; they have suffered much trauma and have developed a slave mentality. They need to be eased out of these difficult mindsets.

The first stage, "I will take you out from under the burdens of Egypt", occurred following the plague of *arov* (wild beasts). Although Pharaoh refused to let the people go (see 8:28), they were no longer subjected to the harsh conditions of slavery. They still, however, had the status of slaves.

Then, following the plague of *barad* (hail), for the first time, Pharaoh referred to the people by name, *Bnei Yisrael* (see 9:35), rather than merely as 'the people'. Thus, their status was upgraded; they were no longer slaves, but neither were they free to leave the country. This was the second stage of redemption: "I will rescue you from their servitude".

The third stage, "I will redeem you", was reached at the plague of the firstborn, when they left Egypt, reaching the status of free people. They then underwent seven weeks of training, preparing to become God's holy nation, achieving the fourth stage of redemption "I will take you to Me as a people..."

These four expressions of redemption correspond to the four cups of wine that we drink on Seder night. "Why", asks the Netziv, "do we drink four cups of wine and not eat four types of bread or meat to commemorate these stages of redemption?" And he answers: "Given that these stages of redemption were designed to change our mindsets, there is no better way than wine to commemorate them, since nothing alters a person's face, mood and mind more quickly than wine, which gladdens the heart and improves one's disposition."

“ As we approach Pesach this year, we are reminded of how God guided our ancestors through a gradual psychological journey from slavery to freedom. We pray that the released hostages, and all those still living with trauma, receive the support they need and find relief from their suffering.

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THE DIN THAT DROWNED THE SIRENS: A YESHIVA STUDENT REMEMBERS THE FIRST GULF WAR

BY: **RABBI GIDEON SYLVESTER**
US Israel Rabbi

Recently, I dusted off my Gulf War diary and read it for the first time in thirty-five years. As I turned the pages, recollections of the conflict during my years as a student at Yeshivat Har Etzion in Israel came back with startling clarity.

We were plunged into war following Iraq's 1990 invasion of Kuwait. A coalition of Western and Arab states responded with 'Operation Desert Storm'. In order to keep America's Arab allies on board, Israel was excluded from this alliance and gave assurances not to respond even if it was attacked. But none of this would prevent Iraq from threatening and later attacking the Jewish State. With war looming, many of my British and American friends packed their bags and left. I was fortunate that my parents supported me in my decision to remain, but I did promise to call them every day to reassure them that I was safe.

As we struggled to confront the gravity of our situation and the immediate threat of a chemical attack, dark humour abounded. This was our coping mechanism. One joke circulating at the time encapsulated our terror, 'What's the connection between Tel Aviv and Hiroshima? . . . Nothing yet'.

We were given gas masks and an injection kit for use in case of catastrophe. The room next to mine was designated as the sealed room for our floor. We covered its windows with plastic and placed wet rags by the door to insulate us against broken glass and gas.

Despite the war, our studies continued. We wanted to focus on our learning, but this was difficult. Many of the yeshiva's kitchen and cleaning staff came from the local Arab villages, but because of the sensitive security situation, the army forbade them from entering our campus. The head of our yeshiva, Rabbi Amital z"l, was adamant that we had a moral responsibility to protect their jobs, so all of us took time from our studies to help in the kitchens.

Most of the sirens roused us from our beds in the early hours of the morning. By the time we had donned our gas masks, sealed the room and waited for the all clear, there seemed little point in going back to bed. I attended the early *netz* minyan, in which one's *Amida* prayer is timed to coincide with the first rays of dawn which at that time of year was around 6.30 am. *Netz* is considered the best time to pray, and while I recall those services as deeply spiritual and uplifting, my diary reminds me that, with so little sleep, I frequently found it hard to focus on the prayers.

> **“ Yeshivot take study very seriously, so despite the distractions, our learning continued intensively. The din of five hundred students debating Talmudic texts drowned out the sirens...**

Yeshivot take study very seriously, so despite the distractions, our learning continued intensively. The din of five hundred students debating Talmudic texts drowned out the sirens, so one student was nominated to sit outside the study hall. As soon as he heard the alarm, he would rush back in and pound on the table. At this signal, five hundred students simultaneously leapt from their seats, dashed down the stairs and

out to the sealed rooms, where they donned their gas masks.

My diary reminds me that my friend and fellow student, Daniel Roselaar, now rabbi of Alei Zion United Synagogue, inspired us when he stopped to secure the doors from closing so everyone else could leave quickly and safely. It was a selfless act given that we only had two minutes to reach safety.

One Friday night, the siren sounded just as we started reciting the *Amida* prayer of the evening service. Everyone froze. The *Amida* is our most intimate encounter with God. A *Mishna* teaches that we do not interrupt it for anything, even if a snake is coiled around our leg! The Talmud clarifies that if it is a poisonous snake, then one certainly does everything possible to save one's life. But no one wanted to be the first to run. Finally, another British rabbinical student, Daniel Beller z"l from Bushey, later a prominent shul rabbi in Raanana, took the initiative. He turned and ran to look after his young family. We all followed him out.

As we processed the trauma of the missile attacks, Rabbi Roselaar shared the news that thousands of Jews had packed into London's Finchley Synagogue to pray for us. That, and the arrival of American Patriot missiles to shoot down the rockets launched from Iraq, raised our spirits. Such gestures of solidarity contrasted strongly with the reports of Palestinians dancing on their rooftops and dishing out sweets each time Iraqi missiles struck Israel.

Safety instructions were delivered via the radio in Hebrew, Arabic, Amharic, English, Yiddish and Russian. But it took a while for the presenters to adapt to our situation. After the first missile attack, they forgot to announce in Amharic that people could remove their masks and leave their sealed rooms. This oversight created chaos among new immigrants from Ethiopia, some of whom remained stuck inside for fourteen hours.

Those who were confused by the regulations were invited to participate in radio phone-in programmes where they could pose their questions to the experts. This might have been very helpful, but since callers were speaking through gas masks, their voices were so muffled that no one could make out a word.

The sirens were also broadcast over the radio. On the first Shabbat of the war, we were instructed to leave our radios on so we would not miss the alerts. Shabbat in yeshiva was normally a delightfully tranquil time, so it was surreal to walk through the campus with radios blaring from every building. Later, the authorities developed a dedicated channel that was silent except for sounding the siren.

“ Rabbi Roselaar shared the news that thousands of Jews had packed into London's Finchley Synagogue to pray for us. That, and the arrival of American Patriot missiles... raised our spirits.

The war ended just before Purim. Rarely has the Megillah felt more relevant. Another Haman had tried to annihilate us. Another Haman had been vanquished. Rapidly, we exchanged our gas masks for costume masks and celebrated, thanking God for the redemption then and now.

Rabbi Gideon Sylvester and friends in their gas masks and protective clothing

THE ANATOMY OF HEBREW - PART 2

DEUS COGITAT, ERGO SUM: GOD THINKS, THEREFORE I AM

BY: **RABBI DAVID LISTER**
Edgware United Synagogue

Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888) understood that Hebrew words exist not in isolation but as part of families of related words.

One example is the Hebrew root היה (*hayah*), meaning "to be." The middle letter י (*yud*) is related to ג (*gimmel*), as both are pronounced using the roof of the mouth. Thus, *hayah* ("to be") is connected with הגה (*hagah*), "to think," as in Psalm 19:16:

הֶגְיוֹן לִבִּי – "*hegyon libi*," the thought of my heart.

Rabbi Hirsch derives from this connection the deep truth that everything that exists began as a thought in the mind of God, who devised its form, function and duration.

This is not merely a past event: in the morning service before the *Shema*, we say that God "renews every day constantly the work of creation" (Psalm 136:7). Thus, all existence at every moment expresses God's thought.

This perspective transforms our worldview. We can see ourselves, our surroundings and history as products of God's mind, presenting challenges for us to overcome and spiritual tasks for us to accomplish. Even in despair, we can trust that God has placed us where we are to play a specific role in a scenario He guides.

> **“ Judaism teaches that our existence is rooted not in our own thinking but in God's thought: *cogitor ergo sum* – [God's] thought exists, therefore I am.**

Rabbi Hirsch observes that this connection between thinking and being echoes Descartes' famous "*cogito ergo sum*" ("I think, therefore I am"). Descartes sought to establish what is real, noting that sensory evidence can be unreliable. The first certainty is our own existence: if we do not exist, who produces our thoughts?

Judaism, however, precedes Descartes. It teaches that our existence is rooted not in our own thinking but in God's thought: *cogitor ergo sum* – [God's] thought exists, therefore I am. Remarkably, Judaism conveys this profound truth in a single word, *hayah*, linking existence to divine cognition.

Through this insight, we see life not as random sequences but as ongoing expressions of God's thought. Each moment, encounter and challenge is an opportunity to participate in creation, mirroring the divine mind. By contemplating this, we gain purpose and reassurance, understanding existence as a dynamic dialogue between God's thought and our own lives.

> **“ Everything that exists began as a thought in the mind of God, who devised its form, function and duration.**

THE TRIBE WEEKLY

PARASHAT VA'ERA

16-17 JANUARY | 28 TEVET

MAKING AND KEEPING PROMISES

BY: **YONI KASMIR**

Tribe gap year student

Parashat Va'era opens with the following verses;

"God spoke to Moshe (Moses) and said to him, "I am Hashem (Y-H-V-H). I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as *Kel-Shakkai*, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name Hashem (Y-H-V-H). I also established My covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as strangers. I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in slavery, and I have remembered My covenant."

These verses become more poignant when looking at the position in the wider context they are found; amongst the backdrop of Moshe's complaining regarding the worsening position of the Jews following God's intervention in Egypt. The question here though is, why does God reveal a name to Moshe which was not revealed to any of the previous prophets?

The Ibn Ezra (1087-1167) interprets the question by offering an idea that names of God reference the actions and roles of God in the world. The name *Kel-Shakkai* was the name used by God in the covenant made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, whereas the name Y-H-V-H refers to God's intention to fulfil the covenant. These two names of God highlight that creating and keeping promises are both necessary parts of meaningful obligations.

On a practical level, we can relate to this by appreciating that while it is important to make commitments, as represented by God's name of *Kel-Shakkai*, it is equally important to make concrete efforts to fulfil these promises, represented by the name Y-H-V-H.

Both of these roles are necessary for God's covenant to be meaningful. So too in our day-to-day lives we should attempt to make meaningful commitments to ourselves and to others as well as take actions to fulfil them.

Thought to ponder:

How can I fulfil or remember a promise I've made as God does in Va'era?

Which plague am I?

Each clue describes a plague from Va'era. Can you guess which plague each clue is talking about?

1. This plague attacked Egypt's most famous river and embarrassed their 'god.'
2. I came from the dust of the earth — tiny, itchy and impossible for the magicians to copy.
3. I fell from the sky with fire inside me — something nature can't do on its own.
4. I rose from the water and invaded every space, from royal rooms to ovens.

Answers: 1: Blood 2: Lice 3: Hail 4: Frogs

THE TRIBE SCRIBE

VA'ERA: BREATHE!

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