

Guest article

by Rabbi David Walk

WHO KNOWS?

What do we really know? That's not such an easy question to answer. Even when people are confronted with irrefutable facts, they often continue to persist in their erroneous assertions. I could obviously use the American president to prove my point. His electoral victory was not historically huge, and this was not the largest tax cut in US history (eighth place). As Daniel Patrick Moynahan famously said, 'You have a right to your opinion, but not your own facts.' There are 'facts' which are verifiably wrong which everybody continues to accept and promulgate; Napoleon was not short (at 168 cm, he was slightly over average for Frenchmen at the time, that's 5 foot 6 inches for stubborn Americans), the Great Wall of China can't be seen from space, *(Ed. note: Actually, I beg to differ - The Great Wall can be seen from space, but many other man-made things can also be seen.)* and water flushed in Australia does not rotate the other way. People tend to filter information to only accept the data which reinforces preconceived notions, 'confirmation bias'. People prefer reassuring falsehoods over inconvenient truths. That reality was not only true of the Jews in Egypt (and, later, everywhere else), but even of Moshe Rabeinu. As we shall see. The first half of this week's Torah

reading is the answer to the questions Moshe asked at the end of last week's parsha. Moshe and Aharon had just returned from their first encounter with Par'o, and it went badly. Their signs and instructions from God were mocked, and the burdens upon the Jews were increased, because they now had to supply their own straw for their brick production. In exasperation, Moshe turns to God and kvetches: O Lord! Why have You harmed this people? Why have You sent me? Since I have come to Par'o to speak in Your name, he has harmed this people, and You have not saved Your people (Sh'mot 5:22-23). There are really two questions which must be addressed: Why have You made things worse? and Why have You sent me? God deals with them in order.

Our parsha begins with God describing the evolving relationship between the Jews and our Parent in heaven. Initially, our ancestors knew God as Elokim or Keil Shakai. These names denote power and control of nature. They designate God as the replacement for the false gods of idolatry who were seen as the purveyors of natural phenomena. However, the Tetragrammaton or four-letter name of God was not 'known' to them. But they did know that name. It is in many verses in B'reishit. That's why the Hebrew word I translated as 'known' is NODATI, which really means 'did not make known'. God didn't reveal that

aspect of Divine reality described by that name. And what is that aspect? Eternity. This name is really a form of the verb 'to be', in the future tense. It describes our God as the being who is always there, and, therefore, is the God of permanent relationships. Elokim made many promise to the Patriarchs; the Eternal will fulfill them.

And the Jews didn't listen (6:9). No surprise there. They couldn't handle that new data for two reasons. One was their physical exhaustion (avoda kasha). The other was confirmation bias. They couldn't assimilate this new reality which requires patience, because their previous experiences and preconceived ideas about God didn't extend to that new information. They were used to a God of action, not evolving relationships. That's what the verse called kotzer ru'ach, shortness of spirit. Their previous attitudes didn't contain that option of a God who would always be there and accompany the Jewish nation, wherever and whenever they may be.

What about that second question: Why have You sent me? The emphasis is on the 'me'. This goes back to the discussion at the Burning Bush Encounter Center. Like many prophets, Moshe didn't want the job. The second half of chapter 6 is the genealogy of Moshe and Aharon. The listing starts with the children of Ya'akov and continues until we get to Levi, and then follows the lineage

to Amram and Yocheved, the parents of the new leadership. There's a short continuation of Aharon's progeny, because they, unlike Moshe's kids, would have a permanent role in the Jewish nation. What does this inform us of? Actually, a lot. First of all, Moshe is probably the first ancient hero who descends from humans and is not a demiurge. But there's more.

According to the Midrash, the descendants of Levi play a significant role during the time of bondage. There's speculation that they didn't work and served as spiritual guides. Where does this come from? I think this assertion is based on the blessings of Ya'akov back in Vaychi. there Ya'akov basically curses Shimon and Levi, and warns them that they will lose their tribal integrity (B'reishit 49:7-8). For Shimon that meant being absorbed by Yehuda and basically disappearing. For Levi that meant serving the other tribes by becoming the kohanim and leviyim spread throughout the country to act as spiritual guides for the nation. When being warned of disappearance, Shimon ignores the threat; Levi takes it to heart.

We can't confirm the Midrash about the Leviyim during slavery in the text, but we know that Amram and Yocheved continued to have children (Moshe) even when the Egyptians threatened death to all male babies. Levi and his offspring

sublimated personal predilections for national goals. Levi fought confirmation bias to become a national asset for religious devotion. He heeded the warning and, now, God is informing Moshe that he's the man for the job, because he has that background. His parents taught him that faith in God and Jewish destiny can overcome preconceived notions and previous experience.

The beginning of this week's parsha teaches us the dangers of confirmation bias, and the amazing opportunities and rewards available to those who can shed the past to forge the future, based on God's promises for Jewish destiny. It's sadly easy to be skeptical and cynical about our role in our nation's future, but that's a dangerous path. Don't let avoda kasha (distractions) and kotzer ru'ach (preconceived notions) stop you from joining the historic march of our people.