

# Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl

## Me'or Einayim

### Parshas Bo

The well-known question raised by the commentators is how Pharaoh's free will was taken away when it should have remained unrestricted. According to our approach, we must pay attention to the precision of the word "אלה" (these) in the phrase "למען שת אותות אלה בקרבו" ("so that I may set these signs of Mine in his midst"). The word "אלה" seems to point directly to the signs that were before his eyes. However, in truth, it was not merely about what Pharaoh saw. Rather, the essence of the Exodus was that knowledge of God was in exile within Pharaoh. Even the people, including the Children of Israel, did not truly know Hashem, despite having received a tradition from their holy forefathers, the patriarchs. Since they were the fourth generation, the true knowledge had been forgotten. This is what King David, peace be upon him, instructed his son Solomon: "Know the God of your father" (I Chronicles 28:9). The essence of the exile was that knowledge of God was in exile in Egypt.

Thus, Pharaoh the wicked said, "Who is Hashem?" (Exodus 5:2), denying the fundamental principle of faith. He only believed in sorcery, as he was a great sorcerer himself, and did not know Hashem, who is the only true existence. Even sorcery, which seemingly opposes the celestial forces, has no power except by the will of the Blessed One, as is explained in Shabbat 67a regarding the story of Rabbi Chanina ben Dosa.

**[NOTE: "Ein od milvado" (There is none besides Him).** Rabbi Ḥanina said: Even sorcery. There was a certain woman who was trying to take dust from under the feet of Rabbi Ḥanina (to perform sorcery against him). He said to her: Take it, your efforts will not succeed, as it is written: *"There is none besides Him"* (Deuteronomy 4:35). But didn't Rabbi Yohanan say: Why are they called *kishufim* (sorcery)? Because they weaken the celestial entourage (*pamalia shel ma'ala*)? The case of Rabbi Ḥanina is different, as his merit was great. **END NOTE]**

Therefore, when Hashem desired to redeem His people, the Children of Israel, from Egypt, it was in order for them to attain true knowledge and to demonstrate that Hashem is the true God, omnipotent and the master of all forces. This is why He said, "so that I may set these signs of Mine in his midst"—because Pharaoh denied the fundamental principle of faith due to his lack of knowledge, saying "Who is Hashem?" Hashem, therefore, placed these signs within him, meaning within his state of exile, so that through this purification process, the name Elohim would be complete, and it would be known that Hashem is the true God, omnipotent, and there is none besides Him—even sorcery, as mentioned.

With this, we can clarify the question raised by the commentators mentioned earlier. The essence of free choice is expressed in the verse: "See, I have set before you today life and good..." (Deuteronomy 30:15), and "choose life" (ibid. 19). How can a person choose good over evil if not through knowledge? Only when a person has the understanding to discern between good and evil can they choose good and reject evil.

However, in the Egyptian exile, knowledge was itself in exile, as mentioned earlier. Consequently, there could not have been complete choice, since true free will is only possible when there is full knowledge. This is the fundamental purpose of the Exodus—to liberate knowledge from exile, enabling proper free choice through understanding.

**[NOTE:** See further in Parashat Shelach, commentary on "Venoda Ki" ("And it became known that"): And it became known that the cause that leads a person to choose one path over another, whether good or evil, is through *da'at* (knowledge/intellect). For as it is stated, "If there is no *da'at*, how can there be distinction?"—as we find in the Gemara (Yerushalmi Berakhot 5:2), "Why was Havdalah (the prayer of distinction) instituted in the blessing of Chonen HaDa'at (the One who grants understanding)?", etc. And through *da'at*, every person chooses according to their own understanding—whether their intellect inclines them to one extreme, or to take a middle path that blends good and evil. Thus, *da'at* is the essence of choice, since its root is from there. And it is known that *da'at* is one of the attributes of the Holy One, Blessed be He, and that it has a root above in the Supreme *Da'at*, etc.—see there for further discussion. **END NOTE]**

Thus, during the exile, when knowledge was trapped in Egypt, free choice was not fully available. If so, it cannot be said that Pharaoh's free will was taken away—since true choice had not yet existed in the first place! Only after the Exodus, when knowledge was freed from exile, did free will fully take effect, as explained.

# Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl

## Me'or Einayim

### Parshas Bo

With this, we can also clarify the question raised by Rambam. This matter is explained in the Zohar Chadash, in the name of the ancients, regarding the concept of free will granted to man and how it coexists with Hashem's foreknowledge—how can both exist simultaneously?

However, as we have stated, the essence of free choice depends on knowledge. When a person truly knows Hashem with complete understanding, then choice becomes relevant. But without knowledge, there is no true choice. Given this, free will and divine knowledge are one and the same, for what does a person choose with? With knowledge. And the knowledge of Hashem is the very essence of choice. Therefore, Hashem's foreknowledge does not contradict free will, because His knowledge is the knowledge of the choice itself—they are not conflicting concepts but rather one unified reality, as explained. Understand this well.

However, what is explained in the Talmud, that "*a person does not commit a sin unless a spirit of folly enters him*" (Sotah 3a), refers to a different matter. For it is well known that the verse states, "The righteous shall live by his faith" (Habakkuk 2:4). Sometimes, a person experiences a fall in knowledge, which serves as a test from the Blessed Creator—his understanding is temporarily withdrawn to see whether he will remain steadfast in the ways of Hashem. Nevertheless, a righteous person holds firm to his path through faith, even when his knowledge is taken from him. He continues to strengthen himself in the ways of Hashem. However, if a person lacks faith, then when his knowledge is diminished, and a spirit of folly enters him, he may come to sin, Heaven forbid. This is what our sages meant when they said: "A person does not sin unless a spirit of folly enters him"—meaning that he experiences a fall in knowledge as a test.

In contrast, during the Egyptian exile, they did not possess true knowledge at all, and therefore, free choice was not applicable at that time, as previously explained. This was because their knowledge was in a state of smallness, meaning they were like a child who lacks full understanding. This aligns with what is said in Shabbat 153b, "*A minor has no mature thought process*." This is also what the verse states: "So that you may tell... how I made a mockery of Egypt" (Exodus 10:2). The word *התעללה* (mockery) is related to the word *עול* (infant) and *יונק* (nursing child), as if to say: "I made them as one who is small and immature in understanding in Egypt." Following this, the verse states: "And you shall know that I am Hashem", meaning that upon their Exodus from Egypt, they would attain complete knowledge and truly know Hashem with a full and mature understanding.

**איתא בזוהר הקדוש בא אל פרעה** It is stated in the Zohar HaKadosh that regarding the verse "Come to Pharaoh" (Exodus 10:1), it should have said "Go to Pharaoh" (לך אל פרעה), which raises a question. Additionally, this connects to the question mentioned earlier from the commentators. The miracle of the Exodus from Egypt was that knowledge was in exile—specifically trapped within Pharaoh, the wicked ruler of Egypt. This is why the Children of Israel were exiled there—to extract knowledge from its captivity. The hardship of the enslavement played a role in completing this process.

It is taught in the Tikkunei Zohar that the verse "And the Egyptians enslaved them with rigor" (Exodus 1:13-14) alludes to deeper meanings:

- "With mortar" (בחוואר)—this refers to *kal vachomer* (the hermeneutical principle of logical inference).
- "And with bricks" (ובלבנים)—this refers to *libun hilchata* (clarification of Halachic principles).
- "And with all manner of labor in the field"—this refers to *the study of Beraitot* (external teachings of the Oral Torah).
- "All their labor that they performed for them with harshness" (בfarech)—this refers to *Pircha* (logical refutations in Torah learning).

This means that all aspects of Torah knowledge were in exile in Egypt. Through their enslavement, the Israelites extracted Torah knowledge from exile, just as they physically left Egypt.

# Menachem Nachum of Chernobyl

## Me'or Einayim

### Parshas Bo

Thus, when Moshe Rabbeinu, peace be upon him, said, "Behold, the Children of Israel have not listened to me..." (Exodus 6:12), Rashi comments that this is one of the ten *kal vachomer* arguments in the Torah. This implies that when Moshe expressed this *kal vachomer*, he was actively drawing the concept of *kal vachomer* out of its exile. Since all of Torah was in exile in Egypt, because knowledge itself was in exile, and knowledge is the Torah, the process of redemption was also a process of liberating Torah and divine understanding from exile.

The Torah begins with the letter Bet (ב—"Bereshit bara...")—and not with Aleph (א), even though Aleph is the first of all letters. Why is this so?

The reason is that the world could not have endured even for a single moment had it begun with Aleph. The immense brilliance and intensity of the letter Aleph—which alludes to the Master of the Universe, Hashem Himself—would have annihilated reality, for the world could not withstand such an overwhelming divine revelation.

However, as the verse states: "For Hashem, God, is a sun and a shield" (Psalms 84:12). Just as the sun's brightness is too intense to look at directly and requires a protective shield, so too, the letter Aleph, representing the infinite essence of Hashem, needed a barrier—symbolized by the letter Bet (ב)—to allow for the world's existence.

Through the letter Bet, the divine presence was constricted and concealed in a way that made creation possible. This is why, immediately after the Bet of "Bereshit", we find many instances of Aleph in the very first words of the Torah: "Bereshit" (בראשית) contains an Aleph, and "Bara Elokim" (ברא אלים) contains multiple Alephs. Once the Bet acted as a medium of contraction (tzimtzum), the Aleph could then manifest within the Torah in a sustainable manner.

This is the meaning of "Come to Pharaoh" (בא אל פרעה)—that through the letter Bet (ב), the Aleph (א) could be revealed within the Torah. Since at that time, the Torah was in exile, Hashem said, "Therefore, I have hardened his heart..." (Exodus 10:1), leading to the Israelites' enslavement with mortar and bricks, which, as mentioned in the Tikkunei Zohar, represents the logical structures of Torah (*kal vachomer* and *libun hilchata*). Through this process, Torah itself was extracted from exile.

As explained in Tikkunei Zohar, "With mortar" (בחוואר) refers to *kal vachomer*—meaning that through their servitude, they freed the principle of *kal vachomer* from its exile. The same applied to other aspects of Torah knowledge, which were also in exile and needed to be redeemed.

This is why the verse continues: "So that I may set these My signs within him" (למען שת' אותותי אלה בקרבו)—the letters of the Torah needed to be released from exile.

The passage concludes with: "So that you may tell... how I made a mockery of Egypt" (למען תספר וגו' את אשר הטעלתי)—which, as explained earlier, indicates a state of smallness (from the root עולל, meaning "infant"). This refers to the exile of knowledge, where divine understanding was in a diminished state.

However, after the Exodus, the verse states: "And you shall know that I am Hashem" (וַיַּדְעְתֶם כִּי אָנִי הִ) —meaning that through the redemption, knowledge was restored to its completeness, as explained above.