

Menachem Mendel of Horodak Pri Ha'etz Parshas Bo

The questioner asked about Rashi's commentary on the phrase "וערכתו הוא", explaining that "he caused the Kohen to lose his money, therefore he should lose his money." (Exodus 13:13) The Rabbi opened with the teaching of our Sages that the mitzvah of redemption (of a firstborn donkey) precedes the mitzvah of breaking its neck, and similarly, the mitzvah of yibbum (levirate marriage) precedes the mitzvah of chalitzah (release from yibbum). However, the difficult service in the Beis HaMikdash is to perform with the proper intent—purely for the sake of Heaven. In yibbum, the intent should be solely for the fulfillment of the mitzvah; therefore, the custom developed to prefer chalitzah instead. The same principle applies here regarding breaking the neck of the donkey.

The Torah states "Come to Pharaoh", and Rashi explains: "Warn him, for I have hardened his heart, etc." The matter is well known: Pharaoh had responded, "I do not know Hashem, and I will not send Israel out." The commentators explain that Pharaoh denied the concept of Divine Providence, which is represented by the Name Havayah (the Tetragrammaton), the One who brings all into existence and gives life to everything. Even though Pharaoh admitted to the existence of a deity in the sense that the world was not created by mere chance but rather by the intention of a higher force, he still followed the belief of other heretics, who claimed that Hashem abandoned the earth after its creation, leaving it under the control of the constellations, stars, and planetary influences. According to this belief, these celestial bodies govern all worldly affairs. This is why all the nations of the world were idol worshipers, as is well known from their practices, though there is no need to elaborate on this here.

This explains Moshe's statement: "And since I came to speak in Your Name", meaning in the Name that represents Divine Providence—the Name Havayah—"things have become worse for this people" (Shemos 5:23). The idea behind this is that the klipah (forces of impurity) strengthens itself in an attempt to maintain its dominance by denying Divine Providence. This is why they subjected Bnei Yisrael to backbreaking labor—to reinforce their worldview. However, they did not realize that even this was a gift from Hashem, as the intense suffering of the exile was itself a process of refinement, as stated by our Sages. Thus, when Hashem commanded "Come to Pharaoh" and warned him, "for I have hardened his heart", the meaning was to explain to him the nature of Divine Providence. Even the fact that he intensified the oppression of Bnei Yisrael was not due to his own power, as he mistakenly believed, demonstrating an absence of Divine oversight. On the contrary—it was itself a manifestation of Hashem's wondrous Providence, as explained above.

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Indeed, such a concept of Divine Providence is distant from the wicked, and their hearts falter at the idea that not even a person stubs his finger, no dry blade of grass is uprooted, and no stone is thrown except at its proper time and place, as it is stated: "To the place where the tree falls, there it shall be" (Koheles 11:3). No movement, whether great or small, from the first tzimtzum (Divine contraction) down to the lowest levels of existence in the earth and beneath it, occurs except by the will of the Blessed One, according to His wisdom, by His Name, and for His glory—to reveal His divinity, wisdom, and attributes, just as He is gracious and merciful. All of creation was brought into existence "Bereishis"—for the sake of Israel and the righteous, who are the foundation of the world. Everything that exists in the world exists within man, and man has been given tremendous power—to uplift, strengthen, and influence all existence and even to alter the natural order through his speech, the breath of his mouth, and his heart's devotion to Heaven. This occurs when he cleaves in simple oneness, without any interruption, causing everything to be illuminated through his attributes and knowledge.

"Understand wisdom, a thousandfold wisdom", for He is the "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father", beyond any grasp or comprehension—only the Infinite One, Blessed be He. As it is written: "And you did not see any form" (Devarim 4:12). However, the form of the letters by which He speaks—these are emanations from Him, similar to the concept of the Aleph, which is a Pela (wondrous mystery), as is known. So too, all the letters, through which the heavens, the earth, and all worlds were created, were not formed from the visual shapes of letters as they now exist, but rather from their primordial Divine essence.

Rather, it is through their essence in the expansion of the form from them, for their external form exists only as a means of clothing themselves, enabling comprehension of their meaning—like teaching a small child the Aleph-Beis, where it is impossible to begin except by showing him the form of the letter Aleph and teaching him its pronunciation.

So too, all of the Torah and mitzvos, which are all the Names and attributes of the Blessed One, manifest through the expansion of form and physicality, but their true essence is only the innermost point of the heart, the purest core, which is entirely beyond all form and physicality—existing solely for Hashem alone. This is the essence of cleaving to His attributes, as it is written: "Just as He is gracious, so too should you be", such as in the mitzvah of tzedakah (charity) or the mitzvah of "And you shall love" (V'ahavta). These attributes of mercy and love exist beyond form but become clothed in the form of letters, such as in the commandments "You shall surely give" (נתן תתן) and "You shall love your fellow as yourself" (ואהבת לרעך כמוך). They then expand into

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physical limbs, compelling one to act accordingly. Thus, all mitzvos serve as expressions of His Names, revealing ways to cleave to Him and His attributes. Whether through the actions of the limbs or through the spirit of Hashem that speaks within him, and His word upon his tongue, which are bound and enveloped in Him, a person has the power to create new heavens and a new earth or to alter the natural order of creation according to Hashem's will. For the very foundation of creation, as it arose in His simple will, was to reveal His strength and attributes, so that He would be called Merciful, Gracious, King, as is well known.

The purpose of creation is to reveal His divinity, as it is stated: "Everyone who is called by My Name and for My glory, I have created him" (Yeshayahu 43:7). From the first tzimtzum (Divine contraction) down to the lowest levels of existence, all created beings, formations, and actions—each in its own way—testify to His divinity. As is known, the earth and everything beneath it sings His praises, for all is for His honor.

This explains why Yehoshua commanded the sun to stand still—to prevent it from singing its shir (song of praise), because Yehoshua himself would be the one to sing in its place. The deeper meaning of this is that man is the bond connecting all the worlds, from the very beginning of creation down to the lowest levels of existence. His physical body spans from Kesser to Chochmah, linking everything in the proper order of hishtalshelus (the chain of worlds).

Since Hashem's glory fills a person, it resides at the deepest core of his life force, which spreads through all his limbs. When a person has no self-directed thought in any of his limbs, when his entire being is surrendered to Hashem alone in absolute self-nullification, then he stands in place of all creation for the sake of Hashem's honor. Since Hashem's glory is revealed in this person, and since man is a microcosm of the universe, no created being can argue against his ability to alter the natural order—for why should the manifestation of Hashem's glory cease through him?

On the contrary, the tzaddik fills the world with Hashem's honor, illuminating more than the midday sun, as it is written: "The moon shall be ashamed and the sun shall be humiliated, for Hashem, the Lord of Hosts, has reigned" (Yeshayahu 24:23). Since the tzaddik is filled with Hashem's glory, kingship, and awe, he is the true source of light, and his praise replaces that of the sun.

Similarly, the Ginai River was punished when it split its waters for Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair. The river responded to Rabbi Pinchas, saying: "I am going to fulfill the will of my Creator, and I certainly do so, whereas you—perhaps you will succeed." Rabbi Pinchas did not argue but simply decreed that its waters should never pass through it again. At

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first glance, the river's argument seems reasonable. However, in truth, this aligns precisely with what we have explained: Rabbi Pinchas ben Yair was filling the place of Hashem's glory, and therefore, the river was unnecessary in that moment—he had the ability to decree that the water should never pass through again. Since all of creation exists to reveal Hashem's divinity and glory, it is difficult to change the natural order except through complete tzaddikim, who completely fill Hashem's place in the world, thus creating a new heavens and new earth in a different manner.

This is related to what our Sages said about Rabbi Eliezer ben Pedas, to whom they responded from Heaven: "If you wish, we will recreate the world anew—perhaps at a time when sustenance (mazon) is more abundant." This implies that changing the natural order is indeed possible, but only for those who fully embody Hashem's presence, effectively recreating reality. While miracles and changes in nature openly demonstrate Hashem's power—that Hashem listens to the voice of a man filled with Divine spirit—in truth, the natural order itself is the greatest testimony to His wonders and absolute power. The fact that nature remains unchanging from the six days of creation until the end of time—as it says, "The heavens declare the glory of God... their voice goes forth throughout the earth" (Tehillim 19:2-5), and "The sun rises and the sun sets" (Koheles 1:5)—is itself the greatest sign of His infinite strength.

As David HaMelech said: "When I behold Your heavens, the work of Your fingers..." (Tehillim 8:4), the consistency of creation is the clearest indication of Hashem's unchanging and unlimited power. Unlike human strength and all physical forces, which are inherently limited and fluctuate—constantly shifting from day to day, hour to hour, as if their strength is finite or exhausted—the Divine force "neither slumbers nor sleeps" (Tehillim 121:4). Hashem is constantly overseeing, sustaining, and renewing creation, as the verse states: "He renews the work of creation each day" (from the morning prayers).

Everything exists only by His simple will—at every moment, He sustains, maintains, and re-creates all existence. If He were to momentarily withdraw His gaze, all would cease to exist in an instant. Indeed, fortunate is the one who contemplates, sees, and understands from the order of the natural world how, through its unchanging nature, one can perceive the greatness of Hashem's individual Divine Providence—His ever-watchful eye. For nothing exists without His life force, which flows back and forth (ratzo v'shov) at all times, in all places, and for every individual. A person cannot receive Hashem's vitality in a continuous flow, for if the life force were to be uninterrupted, the recipient would cease to exist, being entirely nullified within the

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Divine. Therefore, descent is necessary for ascent, and all things must rise upward, as everything comes from Hashem's life-giving energy, which animates all.

Furthermore, descent itself contains life, though in the form of hidden Divine concealment, whereas ascent occurs through revelation. Thus, when one deeply contemplates even the greatest tzimtzum (contraction) and Divine concealment, it paradoxically leads to a greater revelation of Hashem's Shechinah and Divine presence.

However, a fool does not comprehend this. He fails to recognize that the constancy of nature itself is the greatest proof of Hashem's direct governance. Instead, he assumes that everything is left to chance, failing to see Divine Providence in every detail. This was Pharaoh's mistake, as well as the error of all those who share his mindset. They neither knew nor understood that the very consistency of the natural world is itself proof of Hashem's precise, continuous guidance. Even if they acknowledged that the initial creation of the world required a Divine force, as did the kings of the nations, they still failed to recognize that no order of existence could ever continue by mere happenstance. As is well known, this is evident from their own philosophical arguments. However, they claimed that after creation, Hashem left the world to be governed by the fixed system of the stars and constellations, without continuous, individual Divine Providence—without the constant ratzo v'shov (ebb and flow) at every moment. But ultimately, all will be in the hands of the Master of Israel, and "Every soul will praise Hashem"—as our Sages expounded, "On every breath (neshima) a person must praise Hashem" (Berachos 53a). This refers to the constant cycle of ratzo v'shov, which is akin to the trials of the heart, similar to an assayer's stone, upon which all the silver in the world is tested.

The ratzo (yearning, ascent) serves as a test for the heart—to see if it is capable of receiving Divine light. If not, then shov (return, descent) follows immediately, and the cycle begins again. Each time, the soul is tested anew—to know what is in its heart and what has changed since the previous trial. Perhaps now it is ready to receive, and so this cycle continues endlessly.

One who understands this realizes that even shov (descent) is itself part of ratzo (ascent)—it is merely a descent for the purpose of climbing higher. This is why on every breath (neshima), we must praise Hashem—since every inhale and exhale represents this Divine process.

On the other hand, one who remains unaffected, unresponsive, and unmoved by this cycle, failing to perceive its significance, has not merely been excluded from the system

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to teach about himself alone. Rather, this too is from Hashem, for “Hashem made it so that people would fear Him” (Koheles 3:14). Even such a person is included within the Divine process, since everything ultimately ascends to Hashem alone.

This is why Hashem told Moshe—who represents the intellect, as is known—“Come to Pharaoh”. Pharaoh symbolizes the back of the neck (oref), as is known, which represents forgetfulness, descent, and external thoughts. Therefore, “Come to Pharaoh and warn him, for I have hardened his heart”—which means: “I am the Shechinah, as is known.” The Shechinah’s presence in the lower worlds appears as nature, routine, and the constant, unchanging order of the world. However, in truth, “I am, I am—Hashem, the Infinite One, Blessed be He”—only that this reality is concealed. The descent is necessary for the ascent, for Divine presence can only manifest through the process of ratzo v’shov.

The purpose of this is to elevate even the shov (return) into the ratzo (yearning)—to reveal Hashem’s signs and wonders within all existence. This is why the verse says: “So that I may place My signs within him” (Shemos 10:1), meaning: so that Hashem’s Names and letters—the very life force of all creation—can be elevated through the letters of the Torah. The descent exists for the sake of the ascent.

This is also why our Sages taught: “A person should always first arrange the praises of Hashem, and then pray” (Berachos 32a). The ordering of Hashem’s praises is drawn from everything in existence, revealing His greatness and the manifestation of His Divinity in all that is called by His Name and was created for His glory. Thus, there is nothing besides Him, and on every breath we must praise Hashem. After this, one can truly pray, for then one has achieved true d’veikus (attachment to Hashem)—where there is no interruption at all between the soul and the Divine.

The mitzvah of redeeming a firstborn donkey (פדיון פטר חמור) with a sheep represents the elevation of foreign and negative thoughts, drawing them from their impurity into holiness. This is because they have entered one’s consciousness, arising even in the midst of a good and pure thought. These foreign thoughts seek to reascend, just as the exile in Egypt stemmed from false and misplaced love, as explained in the Zohar and the writings of the Arizal, particularly regarding the Shovavim period (a time of spiritual rectification related to the exile and redemption from Egypt). After the redemption from those who are described as “those whose flesh is the flesh of donkeys” (Yechezkel 23:20)—a reference to the materialism and coarseness of Egyptian exile, symbolized by the burden of clay and bricks—Hashem commanded us to perform the mitzvah of redeeming the firstborn donkey. The firstborn donkey (פטר חמור) represents the root of

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material desires, particularly misplaced love (ahavah zarah), which is the first of the months (Rosh Chodesh), corresponding to the seven days of creation, and in Israel, this love is the firstborn (בכור) of emotional attributes. The mitzvah requires redeeming the donkey with a lamb, which is given to a Kohen—symbolizing chesed (divine kindness)—thereby elevating all forms of love and kindness to be directed exclusively toward Hashem.

If the donkey is not redeemed, then its neck must be broken (וערפתו)—meaning, it must not be used at all, because this represents the back of the neck (oref), which is the realm of impurity and spiritual blockage. One must completely discard material pursuits if they cannot be directed purely for the sake of a mitzvah, rather than for personal enjoyment. This is the same concept as the preference for yibbum (levirate marriage) over chalitzah, as explained earlier—one should seek to elevate everything and come to know Hashem in all his ways, achieving intellectual awe (yirah).

Since one who fails to redeem the donkey causes the Kohen to lose his rightful portion—meaning, he has misdirected his love toward external desires—he therefore loses his own material possessions in return.

May Hashem teach us His ways, so that we may walk in His paths and recognize Him in all our ways.

Alternatively, the redemption of the firstborn donkey (פדיין פטר חמור) can be understood in light of the concept discussed earlier regarding true d'veikus (spiritual attachment to Hashem). If a person were able to count every particle of dust composing his physical being, refining his existence to the point that his entire being radiates the Infinite Light of Hashem, then, due to the purity of his physical body and his absolute self-nullification, his very life-force would be completely enveloped in Hashem's presence.

Such a person, having filled himself entirely with Divine light, becomes a microcosm (עולם קטן) that includes all of creation. Through this, he redeems the soul of all beings, freeing them from their state of servitude, and is able to alter the natural order according to his will—since he fills the space designated for Hashem's presence. This is similar to Yehoshua commanding the sun to stand still; since Yehoshua had reached the level where he was the embodiment of Divine light, he himself replaced the function of the sun, and therefore the sun was no longer needed to move forward.

However, if a person is unable to redeem the firstborn donkey, meaning, if he cannot elevate his physical being to holiness, then he is forced to live within the confines of the

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natural order. This is the meaning of "If you do not redeem it, then break its neck (וערפתו)"—one who fails to elevate physicality must instead submit to the path of nature and its limitations. He must then praise Hashem through the appreciation of the natural order, as in the verse: "When I see Your heavens, the work of Your fingers..." (Tehillim 8:4).

The Torah links this mitzvah to the Exodus from Egypt, emphasizing that the purpose of the redemption was to reach Matan Torah. As Hashem said at the beginning of Moshe's mission: "When you bring the people out of Egypt, you will serve G-d on this mountain" (Shemos 3:12). This means receiving the Torah, which is described as "engraved (חרות) on the tablets", and which grants freedom (חירות) from the Angel of Death and from all forms of servitude.

After leaving Egypt, where they had been slaves to slaves—as Rashi explains regarding the firstborn of the maidservant (Shemos 11:5)—they were elevated to the level of receiving the Torah, through which the heavens and the earth were created. At that moment, they contained within themselves the entire order of creation, from the Divine statement, "In the beginning, G-d created", down to the lowest levels of existence. Since Hashem's glory was revealed upon them, they were granted the ability to alter the course of nature—as seen in the miracles of the Exodus.

Thus, the redemption of the firstborn donkey reflects the same spiritual transformation: if one sanctifies material existence, he transcends its limitations. If not, he remains bound within the order of the physical world, where he must serve Hashem by recognizing Divine Providence within nature.