



# JUDAISM FOR LIVING SERIES

## FINDING GOD BY THE NILE RIVER

SOURCE AND DISCUSSION SHEET



Why does one person recognize God in the world while another doesn't? Maybe we can gain insight into this question by analyzing the epic battle between Moshe (Moses) and Paroah (Pharaoh) in the Exodus story.

### SOURCE 1: *Let My People Go! Book of Exodus (5:1-2)*

Afterwards, Moshe and Aaron came and said to Pharoah: **"So said the Lord, the God of Israel: Send out My people** so that they may celebrate for Me in the Wilderness." **Paroah replied, "Who is "the Lord" that I should heed His voice to send out Israel? I do not know "the Lord"** nor will I send out Israel.

וְאַחֵר בָּאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה כֹּה־  
אָמַר ה' אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁלַח אֶת־עַמִּי וַיְחַגּוּ לִי  
בַּמִּדְבָּר:  
וַיֹּאמֶר פַּרְעֹה מִי ה' אֲשֶׁר אֲשַׁמַּע בְּקוֹלוֹ לְשַׁלַּח  
אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל לֹא יָדַעְתִּי אֶת־ה' וְגַם אֶת־יִשְׂרָאֵל  
לֹא אֲשַׁלַּח:

We see in this source Moshe acting as God's representative in the famous "Let My People Go" speech, while Paroah denies that God exists -- Moshe vs. Paroah, prophet against non-believer! Let's delve into their respective life stories to gain some insight into where their divergent perspectives develop:

### SOURCE 2: *Our first Introduction to Paroah, Book of Exodus (1:8) and Rashi*

A new king arose over Egypt, **who didn't know Yosef**...(then the persecution began)

Rashi: He made himself "as if he didn't know Yosef."

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ־חָדָשׁ עַל־מִצְרַיִם אֲשֶׁר לֹא־יָדַע  
אֶת־יוֹסֵף

אשר לא ידע. עָשָׂה עֲצָמוֹ כְּאִלוֹ לֹא יָדְעוּ  
סוּטָה י"א

To refresh your memory, Yosef the son of Yaacov had become the Viceroy of Egypt - second in command to Pharaoh, and literally saved the whole of Egypt from a devastating regional famine, making it the richest country in the world.

It is so incredulous to think that Paroah didn't know who Yosef was and his impact on Egypt, that the famous commentator Rashi explains that of course Paroah knew Yosef in the literal sense, but that he forced himself to look away from all the good that Yosef had done for the country.

## Q: Why was ingratitude a necessary precondition for him to eventually enslave the Jewish People?

If Paroah “acknowledged reality” by appreciating all that Yosef did for his people, he could never have enslaved them. Paroah needed to “erase the debt of gratitude” somehow in order to persecute Yosef’s children. That’s just human nature.

Let’s contrast Paroah’s background with the story of Moshe, which dramatically begins at the banks of the Nile river:

### SOURCE 3: Moshe’s name and his Essence, Exodus 2:10

The child grew up and she brought him to the daughter of Paroah and he was a son to her. She called his name **Moshe**, as she said, because “**I drew him (mishi’sihu) from the water.**”

וַיִּגְדַּל הַיֶּלֶד וַתְּבִאֶהוּ לְבַת־פַּרְעֹה וַיְהִי־לָהּ  
לְבֵן וַתִּקְרָא שְׁמוֹ מֹשֶׁה וַתֹּאמֶר כִּי מִן־הַמַּיִם  
מָשִׁיתִהוּ:

Every time Moshe’s name was uttered it engrained withing him \*gratitude for Basya (his adoptive mother) who drew him out of the river.

\* The Hebrew phrase for gratitude is **hakarat hatov**, which literally means “**recognizing the good.**”

## Q: How does the trait of gratitude affect the way a person sees life? Is there a hint in the Hebrew “hakarat hatov” – “recognition of the good,” which we typically translate into English as gratitude?

If we grow accustomed to recognizing what people do for us, we get used to seeing reality clearly.

### THE FIGHT OVER THE NILE:

Fast forward 80 years to the first plague of the Exodus drama, turning the Nile into blood:

### SOURCE 4: How far Moses’ gratitude extends, Torah Book of Exodus 7:19 and Rashi

The Lord said to Moshe: “Say to Aaron, take your staff and **place your hand over the waters of Egypt** (hit them) and they shall become **blood.**”

Rashi: (Explaining why Moshe didn’t use his staff for this plague): **Since the river protected Moshe as a child, the river was therefore not hit by him** - neither for the **plague of blood** nor for the **plague of the frogs**, rather it was hit by Aaron.

וַיֹּאמֶר ה' אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל־אַהֲרֹן קַח מַטֵּן  
וְנִטְהֵ־יָדְךָ עַל־מַיִמי מִצְרַיִם עַל־נְהַרְתָּם | עַל־  
יַאֲרֵיהֶם וְעַל־אֲגַמֵּיהֶם וְעַל כָּל־מְקוֹה מַיִמִּיהֶם  
וַיְהִי־וַדָּם וְהָיָה דָם בְּכָל־אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּבְעַצְמֵם  
וּבַבְּיֹתִים:  
אמר אל אהרן. לפי שנהגן היאור על משה  
כשנשלה לתוכו, לפיכך לא לקה על ידו לא  
בדם ולא בצפרדעים, ולקה על ידי אהרן  
שמות רבה:

We see in Moshe this trait of recognizing and paying back the good done to him - extending it even to inanimate objects! In fact, when God commands him to go back to Egypt to deliver the Jewish People, Moshe says that he can't do it unless he gets permission from his father-in-law Yisro (who gave him his wife, livelihood and by extension his children) to go! Amazing! But that's how deep this trait defined Moshe's character and essence.

**Q: Do you think it's an accident that Moshe knew God more clearly than any human before or after, and spoke with Him directly as a prophet? How does this trait allow Moshe to perceive and know God?**

God is the ultimate Provider behind all the good in the world. He just works through messengers. Gratitude (and humility) gave Moshe the "eyesight" to see God more clearly than anyone, before or after.

Now consider Paroah's perception of the same Nile river that was the source of salvation for Moshe and the Jews:

### EARLY-MORNING MEETING AT THE NILE!

**SOURCE 5:** *Book of Exodus (7:15) and Rashi / Prophet Ezekiel (29:3)*

**5a.** Go to Paroah in the morning – behold he goes out to the water – and you shall stand opposite him at the River's bank, and the staff that was turned into a snake you shall take in your hand.

**Rashi:** (explaining why Paroah went out so early) He made himself into a god, so he had to go to the Nile early to relieve himself so no one would know that he wasn't.

**5b.** Ezekiel: ....My Nile is my own, I made it myself. (Paroah) 29:3

לך אֶל-פְּרַעֲהַ בִּבְקֹר הַנֶּה יֵצֵא הַמִּימָה  
וְנִצַּבְתָּ לְקִרְאָתוֹ עַל-שִׁפְתַּי הַיָּאֵר וְהַמָּטָה  
אֲשֶׁר-נִהְפָּךְ לְנֹחַשׁ תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ:

הנה יצא המימה. לנקביו; שְׁהִיָּה עוֹשֶׂה  
עֲצָמוֹ אֱלוֹהַּ וְאוֹמֵר שְׂאִינוּ צָרִיךְ לְנִקְבָיו,  
וּמִשְׁכִּים וְיוֹצֵא לְנִילוֹס וְעוֹשֶׂה שֵׁם צָרְכִיו  
תִּנְחוּמָ:

דָּבָר וְאָמַרְתָּ כֹה-אָמַר יְהוָה הִנְנִי עֲלֶיךָ  
פְּרַעֲהַ מֶלֶךְ-מִצְרַיִם הַתֵּנִים הַגְּדוֹל הָרִבֵּץ  
בְּתוֹךְ יֵאֲרִיו אֲשֶׁר אָמַר לִי יֵאֲרִי וְאֲנִי עֹשִׂיתִנִי:

In Paroah's world De-Nile was not just a river in Egypt :-), but a way of looking at the world which skewed reality for him.

How delusional must one be to relieve themselves in the river they steadfastly claim they created?!

**Q: The Nile was the source of all good and bounty in Egypt. Do you think it's accidental that he took credit for it himself? What led him down that path?**

**Q: Do you think that his initial ingratitude towards Yosef had anything to do with it?**

Let's consider a source that explains why ingratitude is such a terrible trait and what it can lead to. The source is referring to the exclusion of the nation of Ammon from ever converting and marrying into the Jewish People, because they refused to give us bread and water when we left Egypt, even though our forefather Avraham had earlier saved their forefather Lot from certain death.

**SOURCE 6:** *Mishnas Rebbe Eliezer ch.87:32/ Sifsei Chaim's explanation V.2 P. 278*

"Why is the punishment for ingratitude so harsh (in the Torah)? This kind of person is the type who is a **denier of God**. A person who denies the good of his friend, tomorrow will deny the good of his Creator." (Mishnas Rebbe Eliezer)

Someone who hides from a good deed or diminishes its value is like someone who puts a jar over an item that he wants to hide. This action of "covering over," is the essence of the trait of denying God. (Sifsei Chaim)

**Q: How does hiding good lead to hiding God?**

Ingratitude demands looking away from the truth, while gratitude shines a light on the truth. Since God is not readily discernable, the path to God is tracing the good back to its Source - gratitude is the flashlight.

**In a world where God is hidden, gratitude is the key to a relationship with Him!  
However, unfortunately we all have a little "Pharoah" within us!**

**Q: Since God is hidden from us, the primary pathway of finding Him is through seeing the good that He sends our way through a myriad of messengers? How do you see this in your life?**

**Q: Do you attribute the good in your life to God? How can we be more mindful of this?**

There really are two steps here: 1) Recognize all the good in your life (...don't become used to it) & 2) Attribute that good to God.

**BACK TO WHERE IT ALL BEGAN:**

We see this foundation of belief illustrated for us through the life of the first Jew Abraham, who bequeathed this secret to us, his children, for all time:

**SOURCE 7:** *Sifsei Chaim V.2 p. 280 on Yalkut Shemoni: Basis of Abraham's Emunah (belief)*

Said Rebbe Yitzchok, it is like a person travelling from place to place and sees a palace burning, and calls out "doesn't this palace have an owner?" With that the owner reveals himself. So too, Avraham said to himself: could it be that the world could exist and function without an owner? With that, God appeared to him, and said I am the Owner of the world! (Yalkut Shemoni Lech Lecha)

The foundation of belief of the first pillar of believers, Avraham our father, sprang from "hakarot hatov"- gratitude (lit. recognizing the good). Since Avraham saw the ongoing sustenance and life of the world, he came to recognize its "mativ" (Source of Goodness) - to believe in the Creator of the Universe. (Sifsei Chaim)

**Q: Why do you suppose gratitude is the key to belief in God?**

**Q: And if it is so central to knowing God, why do think ingratitude is so rampant and insidious in our world?**

Unless we are proactive about gratitude, inertia and habituation will lead us down a path of ingratitude. Here is a four-step system which can help stem the tide and really provide an upgrade in our happiness and in our relationship with God.

### **CHANGE YOUR RELATIONSHIP TO GOD IN ONE MONTH:**

**This is a four-week workshop on Happiness and Connecting to God.**

**There are four phases to this workshop. Each phase is for a week, but the sequence can be repeated again after the conclusion of all four phases.**

#### **Phase 1.**

Each day write for a minimum of 5 minutes about a pleasure that you enjoy (e.g. hot showers, your favorite fruit). Review what you wrote the day before and write about something else the next day.

#### **Phase 2.**

Write about the pleasure of something that sometimes makes you happy and sometimes doesn't (e.g. work, your siblings or parents, school, your children).

#### **Phase 3.**

Write about things in nature that for the most part we take for granted (e.g. warmth of the sun, blue sky, symmetry of trees, puffy white clouds).

#### **Phase 4.**

Write about challenges in your life, and how they too may offer the possibility of happiness and a chance to connect to God.

The thought process is that by starting with all the things that give us pleasure without any resistance, we can work up to the things in life which seem to be "mixed blessings" to extract the pleasure in them as well. This exercise helps develop "gratitude taste buds" connecting us to God. Just remember to attribute these pleasures to God as a personal gift. Many people actually acknowledge various pleasures as blessings, but since they don't attribute them to God they don't feel close to Him as a result. The key is not only to be grateful for the pleasure but to direct that feeling towards building your relationship with God.

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