



**Partners In Torah**  
**San Diego-Los Angeles-Ventura**  
**Take home Dvar Torah**

5786 Parshat Vaera

January 13, 2026

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***Hello, Welcome!***

**Partners In Torah is a community-wide,  
independent and inclusive adult education  
program**

**focusing on understanding Jewish  
relevancy to our lives by studying text  
most interesting to each participant.**

**Through one-on-one discussion for 1 hour  
each week, friendships are forged between  
mentors and mentees.**

***Partners in Torah  
has proven to be effective at reclaiming the  
rich  
legacy of wisdom, inspiration, and  
guidance  
for many who have, until now, lacked  
access.***

***Thank you for joining us!***

**Please encourage friends to join you in  
participating so that we may grow  
together as  
a community.**

## תשפ"ו Vaera

In charging Moshe with his mission to take the Jewish people out of Egypt, Hashem told him (Exodus 4:17),

(יז) וְאֵת הַמִּטֵּה הַזֶּה תִּקַּח בְּיָדְךָ אֲשֶׁר תַּעֲשֶׂה בוֹ אֶת הָאֹתוֹת.

17) *“And this staff you shall take in your hand, with which you shall perform the **signs**.”*

This staff is the very shepherd’s crook that Moshe had at the burning bush when Hashem appeared to him out of the fire. Upon Moshe alleging that the Jewish people would not believe that Hashem had appeared to him, Hashem told Moshe to throw his staff on the ground whereupon the stiff wooden staff transformed into a writhing snake. When Moshe grabbed it by its tail, it turned back into a staff, the very staff that commenced many of the plagues that Hashem would bring upon the Egyptians. Indeed, the first three plagues, *viz*, blood, frogs, and lice, all started with an action done with the staff. These are the **signs** referred to in the verse.

Rabbeinu Ovadia Seforno (d. 1549) adds a dimension of depth to what occurred.

(יז) ואת המטה הזה. ואף על פי שאינו ממין עץ חשוב, הנה קדשתיו להיות לך לאות. תקח בידך. לשבט מושל, שמניתיך לשנות את הטבע במצותך

***And this staff:*** *Even though it is not of a special type of wood, I have sanctified it as a sign for you, like the scepter of a monarch, demonstrating that I have appointed you to change nature with your command.*

Moshe’s simple shepherd’s staff had been transformed into a symbol of his control over the laws of nature!

Yet, Moshe surprisingly did not initiate the first three plagues with the staff; Aharon, his brother, did.

For the plague of blood, it says (7:19),

(יט) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדֹדְךָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל אֶהֱרֹן קַח מַטֶּה וּנְטֵה יָדְךָ עַל מִיַּמֵי מִצְרַיִם עַל נְהַרְתָּם עַל יְאֻרֵיהֶם וְעַל אֲגַמֵיהֶם וְעַל כָּל מְקוֹה מִיַּמֵיהֶם וַיְהִי דָם וַיְהִי דָם בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם וּבַעֲצִים וּבְאֲבָנִים.

19) Hashem said to Moshe, **“Say to Aharon, ‘Take your staff and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt: over their canals, over there reservoirs, and over all their gatherings of water, which shall all become blood; there shall be blood throughout the land of Egypt, even in the wooden and stone vessels.’ ”**

For the plague of frogs, the Torah tells us (8:1),

(א) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדֹדְךָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל אֶהֱרֹן נְטֵה אֶת יָדְךָ בְּמַטֶּה עַל הַנְּהָרוֹת עַל הַיְאֻרִים וְעַל הָאֲגָמִים וְהֵעַל אֶת הַצְּפַרְדֵּיִם עַל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

1) Hashem said to Moshe, **“Say to Aharon, ‘Stretch out your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals, and over the reservoirs, and raise up the frogs over the land of Egypt.’ ”**

For the plague of lice, we are told (8:12),

(יב) וַיֹּאמֶר יְדֹדְךָ אֶל מֹשֶׁה אָמַר אֶל אֶהֱרֹן נְטֵה אֶת מַטֶּה וְהָךְ אֶת עֲפַר הָאָרֶץ וְהָיָה לְכֹנֶם בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.

12) Hashem said to Moshe, **“Say to Aharon, ‘Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the land; it shall become lice throughout the land of Egypt.’ ”**

Why, after empowering Moshe, did Hashem instruct him to have his brother Aharon begin these plagues with the staff? Why couldn't Moshe start these plagues?

Rashi provides the answer (7:19).

(יט) אמור אל אהרן - לפי שהגין היאור על משה כשנשלך לתוכו לפיכך לא לקה על ידו לא בדם ולא בצפרדעים ולקה על ידי אהרן

*19) Say to Aharon: Because the river protected Moshe when he was put there by his mother, he could not smite it, and the same is true with the plague of frogs. It was hit by Aharon.*

For the plague of lice, Rashi tells us (8:12),

(יב) אמור אל אהרן - לא היה העפר בדאי ללקות על ידי משה לפי שהגין עליו כשהרג את המצרי ויטמנהו בחול ולקה על ידי אהרן

*12) Say to Aharon: Moshe couldn't smite the dust because it protected him when he killed the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. Therefore, Aharon struck it.*

What a remarkable lesson that the Torah teaches us! Gratitude must be offered even to an inanimate object such as water or sand. Because these items had protected Moshe, Hashem could not “fairly” command Moshe to hit them, for that would have had Moshe hit something to which he owed a debt of gratitude.

Moshe naturally felt this debt of gratitude and would have been unable in good conscience to smite the water or the sand. Knowing this, Hashem directed Aharon to do it.

Our sages are careful to explain that this is not because we possibly think that water or sand has feelings! Rather, because one should naturally feel gratitude towards something that has helped him, he should not disgrace it. One who lacks this sensitivity has a flawed character. It's about the person, not the object.

The Talmud (Bava Kama 72b) phrases it thus:

אמר ליה רבא לרבה בר מרי מנא הא מילתא דאמרי אינשי בירא דשתית מיניה לא תשדי ביה קלא א"ל דכתיב לא תתעב אדומי כי אחיך הוא ולא תתעב מצרי כי גר היית בארצו

*Rava asked Rabba bar Meri, "What is the source for that which people say, 'One should not throw stones into the well from which he drank?'"*

*He responded, "The verse states (Deuteronomy 23:8),*

*(ח) לֹא־תִתְעַב אֲדָמִי כִּי אַחִיךָ הוּא לֹא־תִתְעַב מִצְרִי כִּי־גֵר הָיִיתָ בְּאֶרֶץ־וּ.*

*8) You shall not reject an Edomite, for he is your brother, you shall not reject an Egyptian, **for you were a sojourner in his land.**"*

Rashi comments on this verse,

לא תתעב מצרי - מכל וכל אף על פי שזרקו זכוריכם ליאור. מה טעם, שהיו לכם אבסניא בשעת הדחק

*Do not reject them completely even though they threw your baby boys into the river. Why? Because the Egyptians hosted you when you were in need. (This refers to when Yaakov and his family went to Egypt because of the famine. Egypt sustained and saved them.)*

What a tall order! Hashem commands us to maintain a sense of gratitude to the Egyptians who committed so many atrocities against us just because one time we benefitted from them? Contemplate from this how sensitive Hashem wants us to be about feelings of gratitude to those from whom we have benefitted. We thus have the source for the concept that one who has had a drink from a well should not throw stones into it.

The Torah teaches us (Exodus 22:30):

*(ל) וְאִנְשֵׁי־קֹדֶשׁ תִּהְיוּ לִי וּבִשְׂרָב בְּשִׂדֵּה טֶרֶפָה לֹא תֹאכְלוּ. לְכֹלֵב תִּשְׁלַכְוּ אֹתוֹ: ס*

*30) People of holiness shall you be to Me; you shall not eat flesh of an animal that was torn in the field (not slaughtered); **to the dog shall you throw it.***

The Midrash explains why.

לכלב תשליכון אותו. ללמדך שאין הקדוש ברוך הוא מקפח שכר כל בריה, לפי שכתוב ולכל בני ישראל לא יחרץ כלב לשונו (שמות יא ז), אמר הקדוש ברוך הוא תנו להם שכרם,

*This is to show you that Hashem doesn't withhold reward from any creature. Because when the Jewish people left Egypt, the dogs did not bark, as it says in the verse (Exodus 11:7) "no dog shall whet its tongue," Hashem said to throw them the carcass as their reward.*

Hashem is modelling gratitude for us, and He is doing so even to an animal, the dog. Dogs have no freedom to choose and did *not* decide not to bark; Hashem prevented them from barking, thus serving as Hashem's tools to show awe and respect for the Jewish people as they left Egypt; hence, their reward.

The Torah directs us to redeem a donkey's firstborn male (Exodus 13:13).

(יג) וְכָל־פֶּטֶר חֲמֹר תִּפְדֶּה בְּשֵׂה

*13) Every first issue (male) donkey, you shall redeem with a lamb or a kid.*

The owner of a first-born male donkey must give a Kohen a lamb or a kid as a redemption, after which he may freely use his newborn donkey.

The *Sefer Hachinuch* (Mitzvah 22) discusses a benefit from this mitzvah.

משרשי מצוה זו, כדי שיזכרו היהודים לעולם הנס שעשה להם האל ביציאת מצרים, שהרג כל בכוריהם שנמשלו לחמורים

*At the root of this mitzvah: that the Jewish people should remember the miracle that Hashem did for them when they left Egypt, that He killed their (the Egyptian's) first born, who are compared to donkeys.*

The Talmud (Bechorot 5b) explains why, of all the non-kosher animals, the donkey needs redemption. Why not horses? The Egyptians are also compared to horses (Ezekiel 23:20).

אמר ר' חנינא, שאלתי את ר' אליעזר בבית מותבא רבא: מה נשתנו פטרי חמורים מפטרי סוסים וגמלים? א"ל: גזירת הכתוב היא, ועוד, שסייעו ישראל בשעת יציאתם ממצרים שאין לך כל אחד ואחד מישראל שלא היו עמו תשעים חמורים לובים טעונים מכספה וזהבה של מצרים

Rabbi Chanina said, "I asked Rabbi Eliezer in the great Bais Hamidrash, 'Why are the first-born donkeys different than the first-born horses or camels?' He answered me, 'It is an edict from Hashem. Also, they helped the Jewish people when they left Egypt. Every Jewish person left Egypt with 90 Egyptian donkeys laden with the Egyptian's gold and silver.' "

Hashem gave us a mitzvah to redeem a donkey to remind us of the benefit that we had from the donkeys when we left Egypt. We are also reminded of the donkeys' kindness to Hashem in carting out all of Egypt's wealth. Hashem had many years earlier promised Avraham Avinu that after the slavery, the Jews would leave with great wealth (Genesis 15:15). The donkeys helped fulfill that promise.

It is remarkable that gratitude does not apply only to human beings who have helped us. We offer gratitude *even to animals* who lack intelligence and recognition and who will never really know about it. Indeed, our remembrance is not of the actual donkeys that did the deed; we are remembering only their offspring. But Hashem wants us to

acknowledge the good that their “ancestors” did because this will improve us and imbue within us the quality of gratitude.

What we are to draw from this is that if the Torah commands us to show gratitude to animals and inanimate objects, which lack feelings and don’t know the difference, how much more so must we express gratitude to *human beings* who have done something for us, who have feelings and who deserve thanks for the goodness that they have performed for us. This is the goal of the lesson.

One who does not feel gratitude towards one who has helped him is revealing that he feels that he was entitled to it and had it coming to him. He feels that his benefactor did not put himself out to do something for him, but, rather, the other did what he was supposed to, to give him what he deserved. One who feels that he has everything coming to him and that everybody should be catering to his needs is a very egotistical and selfish person.

Hashem has commanded us to model our character after His. Just as Hashem is kind and merciful, we need to be kind and merciful. Just as Hashem has no “self” and does everything for others, so, too, we must bestow kindness upon others and not be selfish.

Even for one who currently lacks this sensitivity, all is not lost. By actively feeling gratitude to something inanimate from which we have benefitted and refraining from disgracing it, we are able to develop this attribute within ourselves. Over time, the message will penetrate: “I must feel gratitude to someone or something that has helped me.”

It is not coincidental that all the mitzvot that teach us gratitude are related to the Exodus from Egypt. The (i) three plagues, (ii) not rejecting the Egyptians, (iii) the dogs, and (iv) the donkeys are all related to the Jews leaving Egypt. There is a message here!

The first of the Ten Commandments says (Exodus 20:2),

(ב) אָנֹכִי יְיָ אֱלֹהֶיךָ אֲשֶׁר הוֹצֵאתִיךָ מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים

2) *I am Hashem your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery.*

It is easy to understand why Hashem introduced Himself as “the G-d Who took you out of Egypt” since all saw Him very clearly through the miracles that He performed to take His nation out of Egypt. But why add “*from the house of slavery?*”

The Ibn Ezra (d. 1167) explains.

ואמר אלקיך כי אתה חייב בעבור שהוצאתיך מבית עבדים להיות לי לעבד  
שתעבדני. ותהיה לי לעם. ואני אהיה לך לאלקים

*Hashem said, “I am your G-d” - you are obligated to Me since I took you out of Egypt, from the house of slavery to serve Me and to be My servants. You will be My nation, and I will be your G-d.*

Hashem took the Jewish people out of Egyptian slavery to become His nation, His servants. We accordingly owe Him a debt of gratitude and are obligated to serve Him.

The Ibn Ezra goes on to explain that this is essentially the question of the wise son in the Haggadah. Why are the Jewish people obligated to keep more commandments than the rest of humanity? Aren’t all human beings Hashem’s creations?

The answer is threefold.

הא' עבדים היינו לפרעה. והוא עשה לנו זאת הטובה הגדולה ע"כ אנו חייבין  
לשמור כל מה שיצונו אפילו לא היינו יודעים טעם מצותיו.

1. We were slaves to the Pharaoh. Hashem did us the greatest favor by taking us out of slavery. Therefore, we are obligated to keep His commandments even if we do not understand their reasons.

והב' כי אלה המצות אינם לצרכו כי אם לטוב לנו כל הימים לחיותינו.

2. The mitzvot do nothing for Hashem; rather, they are for *our* good, so that we will have goodness throughout our lives.

והשלישית וצדקה תהיה לנו. שנהיה צדיקים לנחול העה"ב

3. It is a great gift for us so that we can be righteous and inherit a portion in the World to Come.

These three answers encompass all aspects of Jewish life and should inspire within every Jewish heart the deepest, strongest feelings of gratitude to Hashem for having made us Jewish.

1. Hashem has chosen **me** to serve Him. What have I done to deserve this honor? If President Trump called you up one day and said, "Hey, Shlomy, I need a favor." Would you say, "Why did you call me? There are so many other *Shlomy's* out there!" Or would you be tickled to your core and thank him a million times for calling you, of all people; and, of course, you would go to any length to do anything that he asked. Guess what? Hashem, the King of all Kings, Master and Creator of this amazing universe, has called you and told you that He needs your service! It goes much deeper than that. He actually created you just so that He could have the special service that only you can provide. He is interested in you, and He is keeping track of everything that you do.

Hashem is greater than Trump. We should feel tickled to our cores and thank Hashem a million times for calling us, of all people; and, of course, we should kill ourselves to do anything He asks.

2. The matrix of Mitzvot in the Torah is designed to make us righteous people. Together, they encompass every aspect of life and provide clear and wholesome principles that guide a person to lead a perfectly righteous life. Through mitzvah performance one achieves the maximum good that one can achieve in this life, hence, the most meaningful and rewarding life. The manual (the Torah) was written by our Manufacturer.

Imagine a man languishing in bed with a terminal disease, when his phone rings. On the line is his doctor. "Hey, Joe! they have just discovered the cure for your disease! It will make you completely healthy as if nothing happened, and I am coming over now to administer it to you!" Can anyone imagine the joy this man will experience, and the thanks that he will give to his doctor?

How thankful should we be to Hashem for giving us the Torah and mitzvot - the prescription for a healthy wholesome life, on all fronts. Does one need to have a terminal disease to appreciate what he has?

3. We all know that we are going to leave this world at some time; we all come to go. We also know that no one can take anything *from this world* with him when he goes other than the Torah and mitzvot that he has done while here on this earth. The Torah provides us with reward in the World to Come, where we will be for an eternity. A man who struggled all his life to make ends meet and is laden with debt gets a call from President Trump. "Hey, Mike! I heard about your situation, and I am sending you a couple million dollars to take care of your debt and to tide you over for the rest of your life!" Can you imagine the joy that he would experience and the profuse thanks that he would give to his benefactor? Hashem has guaranteed our future for an eternity. How much thanks do we owe Him?

Putting it all together, Hashem's taking us out of Egypt was the beginning of our relationship with Him and the greatest reason for endless thanks to Him for that kindness. He did us the greatest good possible by taking us as His nation, giving us His Torah and mitzvot, thus securing for us a place in the World to Come! For it we owe Him the greatest debt of gratitude.

When we add to this all the good that Hashem does for us on a personal, minute-to-minute basis, giving us health, wealth, family, wisdom, success, warm clothing, and a warm house, and every other blessing that we have, there is no end to the amount of gratitude that we should have to Hashem. If we thanked Hashem every waking minute of our lives, we would still fall way short.

There is one very powerful way that we can show Hashem how much we appreciate all the good that He does for us. That is to use the gratitude that we feel towards Him as an inspiration to do what He wants from us. He does so much for us, the least we can do is to try to do what He wants us to do. When we turn the gratitude into action, real stuff, this shows Hashem how much we really appreciate His goodness.

True gratitude is not measured by how deeply we feel it, but by what it compels us to do. The greatest way to thank Hashem is not with words alone, but by living in a way that reflects awareness of all He has done for us.

When gratitude becomes action, when it shapes our choices, our character, and our commitment to mitzvot, it transforms us. May we merit to recognize Hashem's kindness, never take it for granted, and repay His goodness by striving to do His will each day.

