

PARSHAS VAYIKRA

תש"פ

The world, as we have seen, will not continue as it was before the coronavirus. We discussed last week that there are certain aspects of Klal Yisroel's behavior – and the world's behavior – that Hashem simply doesn't tolerate. Apparently, Hashem has taken very drastic measures to alter those behaviors.

It's easy to point fingers at others to deflect the blame from ourselves. But this is a mistake. There is a beautiful story of the Brisker Rov. He was approached after Mincha on Yom Kippur by someone who was blaming the secular Zionists for all of the difficulties in Eretz Yisroel at the time. The Brisker Rov responded that we just read Maftir Yonah. We should learn from it an incredible lesson. The ship on which Yonah was traveling was full of people worshipping avodo zoro. Still, the only reason why the ship was in danger was because there was one frum Jew on board who wasn't fulfilling his mission in the world. We should learn from the story of Yonah that everything that happens – all over the world – is all about us.

We are the center of the universe and things only happen because of our mitzvos and aveiros and nothing else. This was the message we ended with last time.

People then asked me the following question. In Yetzias Mitzrayim – during makkas bechoros – no Jew was permitted to leave their house. Rashi explains that once the mashchis is released, it does not distinguish between tzaddikim and reshaim. But why? What happened to hashgocho protis? Why would a Jew die simply because he was caught in a plague which was meant to punish reshaim, if he personally didn't deserve to die yet based on his own cheshbon of mitzvos and aveiros?

The answer is in the tefillah of Rosh Hashono and in the Rambam – Hashem has two separate dinim. There is the din on each nation and each social group as a whole, then there is a din on the individual.

The Rambam writes in Hilchos Teshuvah – each human being has his own cheshbon of mitzvos and aveiros. If his mitzvos and zechuyos outweigh his aveiros, he is a tzaddik. If not, he is a rishon. But the same calculation and judgement is also made on the level of nations and on the entire humanity.

We are seeing – for the first time since the mabbul – a destruction that is world-wide – a pandemic that spares no nation and no continent. Hashem says there is something deeply wrong with the world. But what does it mean to us?

We know that the Jews in Egypt became a part of Egypt culture. They wanted to become like Egyptians. Yes, they succeeded in preserving their unique language, dress, and names, but they were overly impressed by the sophistication and advances of Egyptian society. They were very eager to join. When Hashem brought the previous nine plagues to the Egyptians, He made clear distinctions between Jews and Egyptians on His own. But for the last one, something has to happen from Klal Yisroel's side.

Hashem tells Klal Yisroel: After you have seen everything I have done, you must become worthy of being spared. Take the sheep that your masters worshipped and slaughter it in front of their eyes. Take its blood and put it prominently on the doorposts of your houses to show everyone that you are now different from them. You have to distance yourselves from the culture you were previously attached to. Seclude yourself in your house.

Once you make yourselves distinct and detached from the Egyptians, you will no longer be bound to join their fate. You are in your own world and you will be spared. But the moment you continue to identify with Egyptians – the moment you go out of your house – then you are finished. True, for the din of the yochid, Hashem takes everything into account. But Hashem has an infinite amount of time to reward and to punish. The din on the tzibbur on the other hand, is for where they are in the present. As long as you are a part of Egypt, you will be a part of the din on Egypt. If you don't want to be a part of the din on the klal you are surrounded by, you have to distance and separate yourself from that klal.

The Rambam uses the story of Sdom as an example of how this din on the klal and the yochid work together. Hashem judged Sdom as an entire city and it didn't have enough zechuyos as a tzibbur, so everyone who was a member of that tzibbur was doomed.

Let's look at the story of Lot in Sdom and how he was saved. Lot chose to live in Sdom – he wanted to be part of Sdom and was not oblivious to the fact that these were very evil people. He wanted to be somewhat isolated but he chose to live there. Eventually he was selected to be the dayan of the city – a prominent member of society. So, when the malochim took him out they said: don't look back – don't feel bad for them – don't feel any identification with them. Only by totally dissociating yourself from them will you be spared from the din.

But Lot's wife looked back. She still had family, friends, possessions back in Sdom. So she looked back with longing – with identification – and she shared the fate of Sdom. Only total dissociation will help you escape unharmed.

Klal Yisroel is now integrated completely with western society. It occurs on every level and in every aspect imaginable. This is a very dangerous situation. To the degree that we can dissociate from the western world and feel we are a spiritual nation – a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh – and our lives are based on spiritual values, there is hope. We have to recognize clearly all of western society is defined by taivos of money and znus. This is the opposite of what we should stand and live for.

Hashem has brought a mabbul of dever to sweep the world and it is knocking down these avodo zoros before our eyes. People worship science and scientists. Italy thought they had the best medical facilities that could handle any crisis, but they cannot deal with something of this magnitude. It is a mabbul of dever – not just a local plague. Scientists, doctors, politicians, are all helpless. Hashem will have this mabbul raging as long as He wants.

Our job in all this is to look at ourselves.

The gemara in Sukkah says that when it rains on Sukkos, we have to leave our sukkah. We are being prevented from fulfilling Hashem's mitzvah, and we have to take it as Hashem giving us a slap in the face. The gemara in Taanis says rain is not a natural phenomenon – it can't be predicted in advance. It comes straight from Hashem. If it rains on Sukkos, it is a direct message from Hashem that He is not interested in our mitzvos.

Everyone is aware of the tragedy of yeshivos closing early and shuls closing – no more minyonim. Is this not a slap in the face? A message that there is something deeply wrong with our learning and our davening? It should make all of us think. Do we identify as a mamleches

kohanim vegoy kodosh?

For the first time, countless families are not spending hundreds of millions of dollars going away on vacations and fancy hotels for Pesach. It is part of the avodo zoro of money being destroyed. We will be staying at home with our families.

Hashem has placed us in a terrible catch-22. We can't daven in our shuls and learn in our yeshivos – but these are the very things we need to give us zechusim to escape this calamity. Hashem is saying He doesn't want them now! Why? We have to ask ourselves a difficult question: How many times do we go to shul to really serve Hashem? How many times is our learning part of our avodas Hashem? How much is it instead due to the social experience and social pressure?

Hashem wants to see how dedicated we are to Torah and tefillah without the social framework of a yeshiva and a shul. How sincere is your tefillah and learning? Now it is just you and Hashem.

I try to explain to my talmidim what are the nisyonos involved in being a mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh in the midst of western society. There are a number of powerful stories that I often relate. One is about a young man who left kollel in his early thirties and joined an accounting firm. He chose an accounting firm that had only former yeshiva graduates. What was his biggest adjustment? The lack of sedorim? No. The language – the nivul peh that we've grown so accustomed to in the modern world. In a frum office!

Many years ago, after my Bar Mitzvah, I left day-school for various reasons and went to public high-school. My biggest shock was that the non-Jewish kids couldn't get through a single sentence without nivul peh. At the time, I didn't know the gemara in Kesuvos and the Ramban about the severity of the issur of nivul peh. But I was brought up in a home with spiritual values, and I was taught that the way we talked was sacrosanct. I knew that the way we talked had to reflect kedushoh, and I knew for certain that this way of speaking just wasn't who I was. But today, this is the standard, acceptable way our community talks – we learn it from the goyim.

The alcohol abuse in our frum society is rampant. It was never this way before. In Eastern Europe, the graf – the local landowner – always gave the alcohol concession in his area to a Jew to take care of. The owner of the tavern was called a Moshkeh. The reason he didn't give it to a non-Jew was because non-Jews were alcoholics and they couldn't be trusted to not drink all the alcohol themselves. But the Jews never got drunk. Today, we have absorbed all the abuses of non-Jewish society – the avodo zoro of money, the tolerance for znus and alcohol abuse.

Another story that shook me up badly – when the yeshivos closed a week before the zman, a certain rosh yeshiva voiced the following concern. He realized that if they close now and the bochurim don't have a framework of learning for 5 weeks, and they will be stuck at home. What are they going to be doing all that time? They will be on their smartphones for 5 weeks straight! How are they supposed to come back and put their heads back into learning?

He was saying something very serious. Western culture is so pervasive and people are so addicted, that we can't separate ourselves for two minutes! We are so invested in this western culture that if we don't have the social structure and social pressure of a shul or a yeshiva then we go back to our natural world – the corrupt and depraved western world. What will we naturally be doing with all our time? Taking in all the decadence of the gutter culture of the internet – that is where we are truly at.

We are at a cross-roads in our lives. We are being pushed to the wall. A few months ago Klal Yisroel made a declaration with great fanfare to their dedication to limud haTorah at the siyum haShas. Now, how seriously are we taking our learning? Our davening? Are we using every opportunity we are given, now that we can't do anything else – to dedicate ourselves to avodas Hashem single-mindedly? Can I feel

totally fulfilled by being a member of a mamleches kohanim? Am I able to not identify with a corrupt world that chases money and taivoh and znus non-stop?

We are being put to the test – can we dissociate ourselves from the values and goals of the surrounding culture or not?

It is just like in Egypt – Klal Yisroel wanted to be like Egyptians – and they stopped doing bris miloh. This was the thing that physically separated them from the Egyptians and they didn't want it. One opinion says they stopped it abruptly. Another says they did it more subtly – to keep the technical mitzvah of miloh but devised an operation to hide it. This allowed them to integrate into the Egyptian society while still being Jewish. These two approaches are well represented in our Jewish community today. There are those who just assimilate completely into non-Jewish society and become a regular member. Others say no, no, no – we'll have cholov yisroel and glatt kosher schechitah. But in our essence, we are just like the goyim in our hearts, in our minds – with all its decadent values and depravity.

Hashem is bringing a mabbul of dever to the world and we have many korbonos – both in the world at large and in our own communities. Once the powers of destruction are released, they do not distinguish between tzaddikim and reshaim. It is up to us to distinguish ourselves and realize we are different from the rest of the world.

There is a mabbul raging – just like the mabbul which raged in the times of Noach. Noach survived because he was in a different world – entirely inside his teivoh. What was he busy doing? Just the opposite of the world that was being destroyed outside. The world being destroyed was obsessed with taivoh and self-gratification – completely self-absorbed. Noach had to feed all the animals day and night with no time to think about himself. This was total chessed and giving of himself to other creatures.

There is a midrash which always frightens me. When Noach was born Lemech called him Noach. Lemech said that now there would be relief from all of the suffering. How did he know so far in advance? The Yalkut explains that from the time of Enosh, the land kept getting cursed, and earning a livelihood got more and more difficult. Hashem kept punishing the world as a lesson that they should do teshuvah. This didn't work. So, Hashem decided maybe if I bring overwhelming wealth to the world and a pure tzaddik to set the example, they might turn around. So, from the moment of Noach's birth, there was unbelievable wealth in the world. Life got much easier. But what was the response to all that leisure and wealth? An insane pursuit of pleasure. First the normal pleasures, then forbidden pleasures and then unnatural pleasures. Finally, people were so caught up with themselves, they resorted to outright geneivoh and society fell apart – it all had to be wiped away.

After the Holocaust, Hashem showered a shefa of bracha – not just on the world, but on the Jewish community. He gave us the opportunities to rebuild the olom haTorah and make incredible achievements. And the frum community became incredibly wealthy as well. I don't know if in the history of Klal Yisroel the community of shomrei Torah and mitzvos were ever so wealthy.

What do we use it for? Now that we have all that ease, do we use the leisure time to emphasize being the mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh? Boruch Hashem we don't have the nisoyon of aniyus – we don't have any of the struggles for parnassah that our grandparents had – to keep Shabbos with mesirus nefesh. We have such ease and it is frightening. What are we using it for? This is the nisoyon of wealth. After the dor hamabbul didn't deal with the nisoyon of poverty and they couldn't deal with the nisoyon of wealth, Hashem had no choice but to destroy the world!

Hashem is talking to us. The words of Chazal are coming to life right in front of us. The nevi'ei sheker say no Jews will die, no shomrei Torah

will die. But they have died. False hopes are dangerous.

It is time to do serious introspection. If we are being caught up with the sins of the generation or of the entire world, we have to look at ourselves. We have to see how deeply that low moral life of the outside world has penetrated us on a daily, ongoing basis. What are we doing with ourselves – with a world going crazy – when we are secluded for weeks on end? That now I have so much time on my hands, am I taking all the opportunities to be part of a mameches kohanim: to daven like I should, to learn as much as I could, and be exacting in mitzvos as I should? Or am I still involved in the corruption of the world around me?

The Rambam says there are three judgements – on the individual, on the nation, and on the entire world. Right now Hashem has brought a judgement on the entire world. The only way to spare ourselves from this din is by separating ourselves from the rest of the world.

The halacha is very clear – we have to close the shuls and yeshivos because of pikuach nefesh. But we have to feel broken by it. Chazal say from the times of Avrohom Ovinu there were always yeshivos in Klal Yisroel. At every period – before every churbon there were yeshivos set up to continue the mesorah under new circumstances. Before churbon bayis rishon, the Sanhedrin was sent to Bavel to set

up yeshivos ahead of Klal Yisroel's arrival. When the yeshivos in Bavel started to weaken, Hashem sent the four captives to Western Europe and North Africa to set up Torah communities and yeshivos ahead of the mass migrations there. Yeshivos were set up in America so that after the war Jews could thrive there. Today the yeshivos worldwide closed.

Hashem is giving us a slap in the face. We need to wake up and take a serious cheshbon hanefesh to look at ourselves and make sure that we use this opportunity to focus on who and what we are.

I am not a person who predicts when Moshiach comes. I have a mesorah from my Rebbe going back to the Tosfos Yom Tov about the fallout from Shabtai Tzvi. The Vaad Arba Arotzos – the governing body of the Jewish community – decreed that no one is allowed to predict and announce Moshiach is here and coming. Moshiach talk is dangerous. But what is never dangerous is taking stock of ourselves – what are our values? How are we leading our lives, what are we teaching our children? This is the nisoyon we are facing now.

Hashem should send us a yeshuoh and we should be spared from this nisoyon along with the rest of Klal Yisroel. It should wake us up to be that mamleches kohanim vegoy kodosh that Hashem wants us to be.