

PARSHAS BO

תש"פ

Parshas Bo is a special and critical parsha. Until now, the first seven makkos have had three purposes. One was to punish the Egyptians for their cruelty and to force Pharaoh to accept that Hashem runs the world. The second purpose is to show the most powerful and sophisticated nation in the ancient world that the philosophy of avodo zoro which they had built their entire belief-system on was totally false and Hashem is emes. The third was for the sake of Klal Yisroel. We will explain.

If the goal had only been to allow Klal Yisroel to leave Egypt, Hashem would have had Pharaoh capitulate by now. But there is a third purpose—to drill home for all of history that not only is avodo zoro completely false, and that Hashem runs the world, but there is also reward and punishment.

We need to understand the lesson behind each of the makkos. The posuk says the goal here is yediah of Hashem. Through the makkos, you achieve a yediah—an internalized knowledge that Hashem is real and that He watches and is involved in human affairs. One makkoh would not suffice. The truth had to be made a permanent part of each Jew.

At the beginning of the makkoh of hail, Hashem says He is doing this in order to illustrate that Hashem is the overwhelming power—not just a strong power that controls nature, but a power that contradicts nature completely. Fire inside hail is a complete contradiction in nature. It proved that Hashem is a force on a completely different realm than nature. That was makkas borod.

Then there is arbeh, choshech, and makkas bechoros. The lessons that were already taught now have to be drilled in so deeply that they cannot be forgotten for the rest of history.

We read about Moshe challenging Pharaoh—when will Pharaoh finally submit to Hashem's superior power? Pharaoh deluded himself into thinking he was a god who created the Nile river. Con men have a secret. They can fool other people only after they fool themselves. Moshe Rabbeinu confronting Pharaoh is the yetzer tov confronting the yetzer horo. When will the human ego finally be humbled into submission? Hashem sees to it that Pharaoh doesn't capitulate until everything he has is destroyed.

The two main avodo zoros of Egypt were the Nile river and the sun. The first makkoh showed that Hashem controlled the Nile and could turn it from a source of life and prosperity to a source of death and destruction. The ninth makkoh showed that Hashem controlled the power of the sun completely—also no stars and no moon for three days—this is not a mere eclipse.

Pharaoh tells Moshe to leave their sheep and cattle behind—to ensure they return. Moshe says we have to bring everything with us—we don't know what Hashem will demand of us. We have to be willing to give Hashem everything we have because we now belong to Him. We are switching one servitude for another.

On the night of makkas bechoros, Hashem killed the bechoros exactly at midnight. Every first-born died at the same exact moment. But earlier, Moshe tells Pharaoh that it will occur approximately at midnight. Rashi picks up on the discrepancy and explains why Moshe obscured the prediction. He says Moshe was concerned that if he predicted the makkoh would occur precisely at midnight, perhaps the timekeepers in Egypt wouldn't be accurate. They would think it occurred either right

before or right after midnight. Moshe was worried that they would think Moshe was a fraud and dismiss the makkoh!

But let's stop and think about this. No matter when it happened, all the bechoros—men and animals—all dropped dead at the same instant! Of course this is not natural! How can it be dismissed by the Egyptians? Rashi is teaching us a fundamental principle of human nature. When people don't want to believe something, they will twist themselves into pretzels to avoid the truth. Hashem didn't just kill bechoros. There was a gilui Shechinoh which made it clear that Hashem Himself was acting. And all the avodo zoros either melted, rotted, or crumbled! So it is clear that Hashem is bringing the makkoh. Still, if it happened three seconds late, the Egyptians would have said Moshe was conning them. Such is the power of rationalization to avoid seeing what we don't want to see.

Klal Yisroel had to prepare for makkas bechoros by bringing a korbon Pesach. But only 20% of Klal Yisroel survived till this point. 80% couldn't pull themselves out. They were so entrenched in Egyptian way of life that it became part of their essence and their being. Nothing could take them away from who they were.

For the rest who survived, there is now a test of emunoh—bris miloh and korbon Pesach.

Additionally, Hashem tells them to be ready to leave. There is a gilui Shechinoh and total chaos in Egypt—with Pharaoh and all his servants screaming at Klal Yisroel to get out! They are all packed up, with walking sticks in hand and walking shoes on their feet; ready to go. But Hashem says no—you aren't escaping in the dead of night. You are waiting a full six hours—till Hashem Himself takes you out of Egypt. You aren't being freed. You are subject to My will and will leave only at My command.

The same thing happened when Noach wanted to leave the teivoh. Hashem told him to go in, the mabul destroyed the world, and finally it was over. The water level sank, the teivoh settled onto solid ground, and Noach took off the roof. He saw the desolation. He was ready to go out! But he couldn't leave. Hashem first had to tell Noach to leave, and then he could leave.

A Jew is submissive to the will of Hashem, period. What is the first thing Klal Yisroel learned when they finally were allowed to leave Egypt? "You aren't going out because Pharaoh is letting you go. You are leaving because I am taking you out."

This is a powerful message which in fact underlies all mitzvos. We obey Hashem's commands. Full stop. Of course mitzvos have a certain impact on our consciousness. Some mitzvos have many different ways that they impact us. The Rambam says mitzvas shofar has a deep hidden meaning to teach us to waken ourselves to do teshuvah. But the gemara in Rosh Hashono is clear. We do mitzvos because Hashem decreed and we obey.

Shiluach Hakan has all sorts of lessons and reasons, but we do it because Hashem told us.

When we left Egypt, we did not become free people in today's sense of the word. We exchanged one master for another Master. In Parshas Mishpotim we read about drilling a hole in the earlobe of an eved ivri who wants to stay with his Jewish master till Yovel. His master needs to drill his ear because he didn't listen carefully enough at Har Sinai when Hashem declared that we are Hashem's slaves. We are subject

to Hashem's authority and His authority alone. We have to show we deserve it and accept it with love. This is the bris we made with Hashem.

Being an eved of Hashem isn't easy. Hashem makes difficult demands of us at times. Sometimes they are painful and intimidating. Asking hundreds of thousands of adult males to perform bris miloh isn't simple. Asking all these slaves who were completely subservient to their Egyptian masters for generations to suddenly break free—to take their master's avodo zoro, slaughter it in front of their eyes and put its blood on their doorposts? Can you imagine the courage it must have taken to do all that? They thought it was suicide—the Egyptians would surely stone them to death! Hashem says don't worry—I'm going to protect you.

Sometimes Hashem's command requires pain and sacrifice—it took tremendous psychological courage to be Hashem's eved in Egypt. But paradoxically, being Hashem's eved is redemptive. It is liberating. Why? Because, as Rabbeinu Yonah says, free will—*bechiroh chofshis*—is a mitzvah, it takes conscious effort to exercise free will.

Most people are really slaves. Whether it is to their passions, their ego, or the approval of others, they don't really act freely. Their choices are always constrained and they are constantly pushed around by powerful forces within and by society without. Very rarely do people take their lives in their hands and make a truly free decision.

Being an eved Hashem means being the biggest free man—*ben chorin*—there could be. You take your life in your hands and decide

to make a bris with Hashem. Then you have true free choice. You get control over your life—you aren't subject to your ego and your taivos—only to Hashem.

Parshas Bo concludes in an unbelievable way. At the end we read about tefillin.

The gemara in Brochos says the most complete form of kabbolas ol malchus shomayim is having tefillin on your arm and head, a mezuzah on your door and saying kriyas shema. Rabbeinu Yonah asks: what does tefillin have to do with kabbolas ol malchus shomayim? He answers that tefillin is wrapped around one's arm and head for a very important reason. I do everything with my arm; I think all my thoughts with my head. By wrapping tefillin on them, I submit and subject all of my actions to Hashem and all my thoughts to Hashem. By putting mezuzos on all the doors, I submit and subject a serious financial possession I have—my house—to Hashem.

After the entire process of yetzias mitzrayim, the culmination is putting tefillin on our arms and head every day of our lives. All my actions and my thoughts and my financial assets are subject to Hashem's will. We aren't free—we are avodim to Hashem—and this is how we become a ben chorin. Because everyone is a slave to something—whether it is to Pharaoh, to one's taivos, to one's ego, or to one's social circle's approval. The most liberating thing is to be free of all those constraining forces and become much greater by submitting one's self and be answerable to Hashem alone.

That is the essence of yetzias mitzrayim.