

PARSHAS BO

תשפ"א

We come to the conclusion of the confrontation between Moshe and Pharaoh, the end of golus Mitzrayim, and the end of slavery.

The Rambam wrote to his son that the Torah's account of this confrontation between Moshe and Pharaoh mirrors the struggle between the yetzer hatov and yetzer horo. It doesn't mean the Rambam didn't believe it happened. Of course it happened. But the Torah is also giving us deep insights into the human being.

Hashem told Moshe that He has already shown His overwhelming control of all of nature to Pharaoh and the Egyptians. He is continuing with more makkos to make this lesson so clear to Klal Yisroel, that they will convey these events to their children and grandchildren. They will know that I am Hashem. There is emunoh and then there is yediyoh. Yediyoh means to know something and experience it as a deep part of your being – intrinsic knowledge.

Hashem told Moshe to demand that Pharaoh submit himself to Hashem. Pharaoh has unlimited ego. We read in the haftorah that Pharaoh thought he was a god and he created the world! Pharaoh reflects the mindset of many people.

Last week we read how Moshe confronted Pharaoh at the banks of the Nile. Why? Pharaoh convinced himself that he was a god – an all-powerful being. It would mean that he had no physical need to relieve himself. But since the reality was that he was a physical being, he needed to go to the river for 15 minutes early in the morning to take care of his physical needs. But for the rest of the 23 hours and 45 minutes of the day, he deluded himself to thinking he was a god.

Many people live with these kinds of fantasies about who and what they are.

Moshe Rabbeinu had given Pharaoh advanced warning of everything that was going to happen – and it happened! Now he is instructed by Hashem to tell Pharaoh about makkas bechoros, which will occur exactly at midnight. Moshe Rabbeinu however, switched the wording just slightly and told Pharaoh that the makkos would occur 'around midnight'. Why the change? Rashi explains that if the Egyptian clocks would be a little off, and they think the firstborn died a little before or a little after midnight, they would accuse Moshe of being a fraud and would have an excuse to ignore the whole thing.

In makkas dever, the Malbim explained that of all the thousands of animals owned by Jews, only one animal died. This belonged to the son of the Egyptian who had relations with a Jewish woman. Once Pharaoh became aware that this was true, it was enough for Pharaoh to dismiss the whole makkoh as chance. If Pharaoh was given any wiggle-room, he would use it as an excuse to ignore Hashem's message to him.

Here, Moshe does not want to give Pharaoh any wiggle-room. He only says the makkoh would occur 'around midnight'.

For nine previous makkos, Moshe predicted they would occur and they occurred. There is no reason to think this makkoh would be any different. But we find that Pharaoh went to sleep. Rashi says he went to bed like any ordinary night and he was awoken by the screams of the Egyptians. This is an incredible Rashi. He is telling us that Pharaoh's ego did not allow him to give in and submit to Hashem's power. He is the king of Egypt. No-one tells him what to do. It doesn't matter that his family and his country is on the verge of collapse. He still goes to sleep, in his bed, expecting to wake up as usual like kings and everything will be under control.

This teaches us about the unlimited capacity for people to delude themselves. We live in a world of self-delusion. You can scream the truth to people and hold to their faces and it won't matter. In the United States, everyone is screaming about violence and lawlessness. When there were Black Lives Matter protests and riots, the right-wing was screaming about violence and lawlessness – how terrible it is. When the right-wingers storm the capitol, the left-wingers suddenly start screaming about violence and lawlessness and how terrible it is. Everyone is so in their ways and there is nothing you can do to budge them. You have to shake a person to their very depths until they realize they are living in a fantasy and they have to face the reality as it is.

We learn from the posuk of 'ho'odom b'shevuoh' that to be a human being means to think through something with yishuv hadaas. If you just say or do things impulsively or reflexively without thinking, you aren't really a human being.

But most people don't want to think because it is too uncomfortable to think about who we are and what we are supposed to be doing in this world. What are the messages Hashem is sending us? Hashem is shaking up the entire world in an unbelievable manner. On the physical level, on the social level, the whole world is in chaos. But to hear these messages means they have to change the way they have been living. They have to acknowledge that the way they have been living their lives was totally wrong. People don't want to hear this kind of message.

The new coronavirus vaccine was touted as a medical miracle. We will bring an end to the pandemic. Things will finally be brought back under control. Then the mutations and third wave begin. All of Israel went hysterical. Hashem is sending us a message. You think you can bring this virus under control with your own power? I'll show you that you can't. Only I control the world.

In truth, Klal Yisroel does control the world with our mitzvos and maasim tovim. Hashem gave us a way to live our lives and when we ignore these instructions, Hashem brings chaos to shake things up.

Two years ago two people thought they were in charge of the world – Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin. Today, Trump is obviously out of office and Putin came down with Parkinson's disease and it is unclear how long he can lead the country with such a degenerative condition. They thought they were running the world, and Hashem shows them very clearly that they are merely His pawns and His tools to be used and discarded at will.

In Egypt, Klal Yisroel were caught in a very serious quandary. On the one hand, they were suffering under back-breaking slavery. But on the other hand, human beings are very adaptable. They can get used to horrible conditions. They realize that as slaves, all their physical needs are provided for by their masters. They have to work extremely hard, but they have no responsibilities. Do they really want to leave Egypt and gain their freedom? It is not as simple as one would think.

How did this whole slavery come to be? All the way back – 83 years ago, Klal Yisroel wanted to integrate into Egyptian society. They stopped bris miloh. Pharaoh was afraid that Klal Yisroel would one day take over so he devised a plan to enslave them. He started a campaign of national service – with Pharaoh himself participating – using the Jews' need for acceptance by the Egyptians. Slowly he gave out exemptions for native Egyptians and eventually only Klal Yisroel remained and were enslaved. And they all eagerly volunteered and got trapped –

except for one shevet – Shevet Levi. They are busy learning Torah. They had no intention of integrating into Egyptian society. They had no intention of being like the Egyptians. They were busy continuing the mesorah of the Ovos.

When Yosef was in charge of Egypt, he set up an ongoing arrangement where the Jews living in Goshen would live off the Egyptian treasury. They wouldn't have to work and could be free to learn full-time. But then most of Klal Yisroel left Goshen, entered the national service, and became slaves, while Shevet Levi remained the entire time operating under the original system of support that Yosef set up. This is why they could continue learning Torah. They didn't stop bris miloh. They remained Jewish.

With the other makkos like dever or shechin, nothing affected the Jews. But in one makkoh, choshech, 80% of the Jews died! Which 80%? The ones who did not want to leave Egypt. They were satisfied with their lifestyle in Egypt being supported as slaves. Only 20% said we want to leave to serve Hashem. But it wasn't enough for them to just say they wanted to leave. They had to do something to show they don't belong in Egypt. They had to make a clear statement: We are our own people with our own identity.

They took a korbon Pesach which was the avodo zoro of the Egyptians, they slaughtered it and put its blood on their doorposts – announcing to everyone that they are no longer part of Egypt. This is what spared the Jews from the makkas bechoros. Hashem skipped over those Jewish houses which had this blood on their doorposts. We call this Yom Tov Pesach for this very reason. Hashem only spared those houses because they distinguished themselves from the rest of Egypt. Only those Jews survived the makkos because they rejected the avodo zoro of their masters and took back their separate identity.

Jumping ahead forty years – Klal Yisroel were coming to Eretz Canaan. It presents a different set of tests. They were not as advanced and sophisticated as Egyptian society. They now faced the nations of Moav and Midian. Moav was a nation founded on incest, its culture is znus and taivoh. This is what pulled Klal Yisroel away in Arvos Moav.

Many things become popular – technological advances, taivos, etc. The only thing that keeps you on track is being dovuk in Hashem. Not

just keeping mitzvos. Deveikus.

We live in a confusing world and there are many pulls we need to resist. The glorification of taivoh and the worship of science and technology. These are the pulls of Moav and Egypt.

The same is true today. The society of the United States is on the verge of collapse. The downfall of the dor hamabul came from their tremendous wealth that resulted in the pursuit of unnatural taivos. But the aveiroh that sealed their fate was chomos – a culture of theft.

We saw in the summer that the social fabric of the United States just fell apart before our eyes. Any society which is built on a pursuit of taivoh is doomed to collapse. It happened to the dor hamabul and it happened to the Roman Empire. A society that is not built on the backbone of spiritual values falls into a void of taivoh and will collapse upon itself.

Only by being dovuk in Hashem can a society endure.

Limud haTorah is the glue that attaches us to Hashem. Without it, there is no real, lasting deveikus. We ask in our davening for Hashem to open our hearts to Torah, and then He can implant ahavoh and yiroh. We ask that our eyes be enlightened to His Torah, and then we can cling to His mitzvos and then we can be single-minded to focus on ahavoh and yiroh. It all hinges on a deep understanding of Torah because that is the only way of connecting to Hashem.

With all the craziness that is going on, with all the pulls and distractions, the only thing we have to act as a counter-balance and stabilize our lives is a strong attachment to limud haTorah.

Besides being the biggest mitzvoh and bringing us to high levels of ahavoh and yiroh, the only way to avoid getting sucked into the void of pursuit of taivoh is to immerse our minds in a gemara, Rashi and Tosfos.

We don't know which direction the world is going. But being attached to Torah gives us a firm anchor and a stable existence.

Bilaam knew that the only way to defeat Klal Yisroel is to pull them away from their deveikus in Hashem and lure them to run after the taivoh of Midian women. Then they can be destroyed.