

PARSHAS BESHALACH 5778

Last week in Parshas Bo we read that Hashem Himself carried out makkas bechoros. It entailed not only killing the firstborn Egyptians, but all the avodo zoros of Egypt were wiped out as well. The Haggadah explains that Hashem did not employ any other spiritual being or force to execute this makkoh. What does that mean?

The Rambam describes the mechanics of hashgocho protis with the ma'amar Chazal that each and every natural phenomenon has a maloch and a mazal above it which makes it occur. Hashem created a system of nature in this world which starts with His will alone and it initiates a whole chain of command through malochim and mazolos until that command is carried out in the physical world. But on this night of makkas bechoros, this system was overridden. Hashem directly took the lives of the bechoros with a Gilui Shechinoh. Everyone—Jews and Egyptians alike—saw the hand of Hashem with absolute clarity. And it was supernatural—all the first born fell dead at the exact moment of midnight.

In this week's parsha as well, the Egyptians recognized clearly that Hashem is fighting on behalf of Klal Yisroel at Yam Suf.

The posuk in Chumash makes a connection between leaving Egypt and the prohibition of ribbis. What is the basis for this connection? On that night, an amazing miracle happened. The people of Egypt were steeped in immorality and it was not public knowledge who was a first born and who wasn't. Only an omniscient being like Hashem could have identified who was the first born in each household. So too only an omniscient being knows the reality of everyone's financial dealings.

At this point of the geuloh, a large portion of Klal Yisroel were not prepared for the total paradigm shift that was underway. Avodo zoro was still a dominant ideology and in order to break their connection to it, Hashem commanded them "mishchu u'k'chu," to withdraw and take a korban Pesach. This was a very difficult thing psychologically for Klal Yisroel to do. They were used to worshipping the natural forces that were assumed to be in control of their existence and prosperity. A human being wants to feel he is in control over his life and has a natural urge to try to manipulate the forces that he perceives are in charge of his life.

Torah says that Hashem is the Absolute power that controls the world, and the forces of nature are only His tools. Yet the Torah tells us we still can control what happens to us because Hashem responds to our mitzvos and aveiros. Hashem told Klal Yisroel to withdraw from the false belief that manipulating natural forces can control your life and take the korban and perform the mitzvah which will give you the zechus to allow Hashem to redeem you. This is the deep lesson Klal Yisroel was supposed to learn and it entailed a dramatic shift of orientation about how the world functions and what people can do to shape their destiny.

Klal Yisroel were told another thing. They will be shown an unusual departure from normal animal behavior. When they leave Egypt, no dog will bark—in order to teach you that this is the Yad Hashem. Prepare yourselves to leave Egypt by going to your Egyptian neighbors the day before you leave and request gold and silver and clothing. Do this because I need to fulfill a promise that I made to Avrohom Ovinu. Why couldn't Hashem wait for the bizas hayam to fulfill this promise? Because He didn't want even 7 days to go by with room for complaint by Avrohom. So they walked out of Egypt with all the wealth on their children's backs.

This is an unusual way for a nation to prepare themselves before marching into the desert! Shouldn't they take food and water? No. For that, 600,000 men, 3,000,000 people, all waited till the very last minute. The next morning, right before they left, they grabbed some flour and water to make a quick dough to stuff into some back pack on the way out to let it bake on their backs! Why didn't they take more practical precautions earlier?

It was because Klal Yisroel were so overwhelmed by the Gilui Shechinoh they had just experienced, their radical shift in orientation allowed them to rely on Hashem completely.

Recently, the secular Israeli press was scandalized by the discovery that religious school textbooks teach their students that Hashem is in control over the natural world and nothing happens in the universe that is not the will of Hashem. They cried "primitive!" "anti-science indoctrination!" They demanded to defund these religious schools because they are distorting the truth about the world—that the laws of nature are really in charge.

Not everyone can manage such a radical shift to recognize that Hashem is running the world. It took ten makkos and a Gilui Shechinoh and still only a minority of Jews were on the level to make that total transition of orientation. They left with a little dough on their backs and that was it. Into the midbor they went—no provisions. They were now completely in Hashem's hands.

Seven days later at Yam Suf, there was another lesson that had to be learned. Until now they had been following Moshe Rabbeinu and relying on his guidance. Now they were surrounded by danger on all sides and started to panic emotionally. There was also a level of intellectual doubt that crept in as well. Yet they are very well aware that Hashem is the proper address to turn to for help. Seeing danger all around them, they instinctively start to daven to Hashem for salvation. They had seen enough in Egypt to build a strong foundation of emunoh that Hashem would protect them. Some turn to Moshe and challenge him: If we are going to die here in the end, what was the point of taking us out of Egypt in the first place? Moshe responds that there is nothing to fear—just sit back and watch Hashem take care of everything. Hashem then instructed Klal Yisroel to simply

march into the sea! What is going on?

Hashem wanted Klal Yisroel to reach a number of milestones. One was to test the extent of Klal Yisroel's bitochon. He put them in a situation which was absolutely hopeless with no logical chance of escape. He wanted to push Klal Yisroel's limits and let them achieve absolute reliance in Hashem in the face of all logic.

While in Egypt, Klal Yisroel took a very passive role in the process of geuloh. The persecutions were over. They were no longer being oppressed and enslaved for an entire year while the makkos were going on. They were spectators who were supposed to learn the lessons that were being taught to them through the things that were happening to the Egyptians. Seeing time and time again how Moshe Rabbeinu predicted the makkos and watching them happen just as predicted, was enough for Klal Yisroel to trust Moshe's authenticity. He was a true novi of Hashem and they were committed to following him. Now it was happening to them. They were leaving the midbor and they were told to walk straight into the water! This was a lesson being learned on a whole different level.

There are two opinions in the Midrash about how Kriyas Yam Suf took place. One opinion says that Klal Yisroel went in the water all the way up to their mouths, and then all the water suddenly split completely and they saw it was dry land down to the end. Another says that every step was another miracle—the water only retreated and split little by little as they walked.

Who went first into the yam? Until now, Moshe was at the forefront of all the events in the process of geuloh. Here, we find that other Jews take the leading role. All Moshe Rabbeinu does is lift his staff to make the wind blow from the shore. He tells them to go into the sea without him! Shevet Yehudoh and Nachshon jump in first. Because of this, Shevet Yehudoh was rewarded and deserved malchus. Another milestone reached.

The willingness to rely on Hashem totally and absolutely in the face of all logic, and experience the Gilui Shechinoh and internalize it, these things made Klal Yisroel worthy of rising to a higher level. It is one thing to have a powerful experience and be impressed by it. Even deeply impressed. But it is another thing to then take that impression and concretize it and make it real. Klal Yisroel were given enough proofs of Hashem's power and omniscience in Egypt to make them believe in their minds that Hashem is in control of the world. But they needed to go through a personal experience of crisis where it seems they are doomed and still be completely convinced that Hashem is in control. Kriyas Yam Suf was a test of their emunoh which concretized and solidified their emunoh at the same time.

When they reached the critical point in the water, the water spilt and the ground instantly dried up. But it had to be done one step at a time. The emunoh and bitochon was so strong that it overcame every fearful emotion and logical paradox. They achieved the milestone of malchus.

What is the essence of a melech? Chazal say he has to rule over himself. The pesukim say the melech has to have two sifrei Torah and carry one with him at all times. It is because a melech is not his own power. He represents Hashem's malchus in the world. Shmuel told Shaul that Hashem chose him to represent Hashem as His leader over His people. It is not just your private ego trip. The Maharam explains why a melech cannot forgo on his kovod—because Hashem gives the melech the right to rule but malchus remains with Hashem. The melech's kovod is given to him by Hashem to be a representative of Hashem's malchus in the world. Once

a melech is able to rule over himself and his own ego, he can be the one to carry Hashem's malchus over Klal Yisroel and he doesn't put himself in the picture.

Yehudoh showed that he had absolute bitochon in Hashem's power to save Klal Yisroel—that He runs the entire world down to the last detail and I am nothing. So Yehudah can be the melech over a mamleches kohanim. Klal Yisroel showed they can be that mamleches kohanim at the same time.

The midrash says that at this time, the angels were protesting: Why is Hashem saving the Jews and drowning the Egyptians? They both worship avodo zoro! But we can ask the question—why are the angels protesting now and not earlier when they were being saved from the slavery back in Egypt and the makkos were only hitting the Egyptians?

The Meshech Chochmoh gives the following answer. When there is achdus among Klal Yisroel and they maintain their separate identity as a unit, no harm will come to them. In Egypt there was unity. No-one was moser anyone to the authorities (except for Doston and Aviom who didn't see Moshe as being one of them). There is a special zechus that is achieved when there is harmony between Jews and there is a display of middos tovos. This zechus can withstand the disaster that would otherwise come because of very big aveiros chamuros. But if a tzibbur has machlokes and lack middos tovos, then tragedy can happen. In the dor of Dovid Hamelech, the level of tzidkus was high. But, there was great internal conflict and discord. One betrayed the other. As a result, they lost battles and soldiers were killed. But the generation of Achev was the opposite. Although they worshipped avodo zoro, there were no betrayals and there was unity. As a result, they won wars and suffered few casualties.

Hashem is willing to dwell among us in the midst of tumoh as long as there is achdus. But when there is a breakdown of middos, Hashem cannot be there, and there will be destruction. What sealed the fate of the Dor Hamabul according to the gemara in Sanhedrin was not the unbelievable immorality. It was rampant thievery. So too in Egypt, Klal Yisroel were unified and there could be no criticism in Heaven against them, even though they worshipped avodo zoro. But when it came to the panic at Kriyas Yam Suf, Klal Yisroel were split into factions and lost the unity which protected them. So now they became vulnerable to the angels' protest.

The midrash says in Egypt, both Jews and Egyptians worshipped avodo zoro. At Yam Suf, even the Egyptians recognized the Yad Hashem and did teshuvoh. But there is a big difference. Klal Yisroel were under pressure of the burden of their masters—their masters controlled them and they absorbed their culture. When the makkos began and the pressure from slavery was removed for six months, Klal Yisroel were able to get back to themselves and release themselves from Egyptian influence. They rejected avodo zoro and did mitzvos and brought a Korban Pesach. In Yam Suf it was just the opposite. Hashem punished the Egyptians horribly at Yam Suf, everybody sees the Yad Hashem—including the Egyptians. So of course they did teshuvah under pressure.

When do you see the depth of a person's nefesh? When life is good and easy. So when life was easy for the Egyptians, they sank into immorality and avodo zoro. When they start to get punished and pressured, then they see the Yad Hashem and do teshuvoh. For Klal Yisroel, the pressure of slavery made them worship avodo zoro and when they found some reprieve they immediately renounced avodo zoro and began doing mitzvos. The real Klal Yisroel came out.

We live in a generation that has been turned upside down from what it was 70 and 100 years ago. You have to be blind not to see the Yad Hashem in human history over the past century. There were difficult times and now there are good times. I have seen both phases and I often get bewildered when talking to Jews who have only seen prosperity and ease. The wealth in the Jewish community and the ease of Jewish life in this generation is beyond description. Yet we find so much pettiness and machlokes—a loss of priorities about what's important.

The midrash talks about two types of life conditions before the mabul. Before Noach was born, life was hard. Growing food was difficult, and Hashem thought that perhaps the generation was wicked because of the hardships of life. So he brought a prosperity to the world. What did people do in response? They got drunk with pursuit of pleasure and then began to steal from each other. Hashem said it has to come to an end.

It is clear to see that Hashem is radically rearranging the basic structure of the world. After the destruction of Europe, He has given us tremendous opportunity. A level of freedom and security we haven't enjoyed in centuries. But Hashem is watching what we do with it. He is giving us an opportunity of respite from persecution and giving us affluence to see who is worthy of geuloh and who isn't.

Just like in Egypt, many Jews weren't willing to make that break with Egyptian culture. The radical shift in orientation was too much to handle and they wanted to stay. So they perished in makkas choshech. Only a small percentage were able to learn the lessons from the ten makkos and the Gilui Shechinoh that they saw, to raise their level and make that adjustment. Three million people walked out into a midbor without a drop of water and little food and six days later they charged into the Yam Suf.

Who did Hashem choose to save? Those who returned to themselves when they were relieved from their servitude. Those who came to bring a Korban Pesach with an achdus and mesiras nefesh. It was a korban of the yochid and the tzibbur together. The angels saw a moment of pirud at Yam Suf and Hashem said look at who they really are when they have luxury and comfort. When they reach Har Sinai they are k'ish echod b'lev echod—complete achdus.

We need to take the lessons of this week's parsha: Firstly, to

work on achdus—to minimize machlokes—first among our own smaller inner circle and then between different circles. There is a tremendous amount of machlokes today which distracts us from what's really important in life. Secondly, we have to see the affluence and luxury we enjoy today as a precious opportunity to show Hashem who we really are and what our Torah values mean to us. Even the people who are considered poor today are infinitely wealthier than anyone 100 years ago.

One final lesson:

Klal Yisroel went through a tremendous hisorerus at Yam Suf—an unbelievable Gilui Shechinoh. But right afterward, they ran out of water and complained to Hashem that they couldn't drink the water at Moroh. Hashem responded with a command to take something bitter and it turned the waters into sweet, drinkable water. You still need Hashem.

Here, Moshe Rabbeinu made a takono to be kovea limud haTorah berabim every three days. Why right there in Moroh? Because after you have a hisromemus like Kriyas Yam Suf, you need to make it real and concrete and not let it fizzle out. They have six more weeks to develop and grow to be zoche to kabbolas haTorah. The way to make this hisorerus permanent is to set down a kevius in limud haTorah.

This is true for us as well. Whenever we experience an uplifting moment and feel the yearning of our neshomo for more ruchniyus, we need to grab that spark and turn it into a kevius of a seder limud and not let it fade into nothing. Every time you open that sefer that you committed yourself to as a result of that hisorerus, you'll be reminded of it and be inspired by it again.

There are many important lessons we learn from this parsha.

We have to understand more than anything else, Hashem shows us in each generation that He alone is running the world. Sometimes it is more manifest and sometimes it's hidden. Sometimes you need to understand history and have a long-term perspective. But in every generation, He demands something unique from us. When He gives us calm and ease, it is a gift that He expects us to do something positive with. We need to have unity and stop the pirud among Jews—care for each and every Jew. And finally, whenever you have a hisorerus, make it permanent and real by tying it down to a new seder limud.