

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת בא

החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה

“This month shall be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be for you the first of the months of the year” (12:2)

Why is Rosh Chodesh the first mitzvah of the Torah? We must remember that this mitzvah was given to slaves. One of the hallmarks of slaves is that time means nothing to them. They cannot determine what they do and how they spend their time. The defining characteristic of a free person is that he is the master of his own time. He can do what he wants at all times. By first giving Bnei Yisrael the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh, Hashem indicated to the Jews that they were now a free nation.

In order to be free, Hashem had to remove the marks of slavery from them, namely, the lack of control over time and money. That is why Hashem also instructed them to take money from the Egyptians. Although the Torah was the true goal of the exodus, it was not enough of a lure for the people to get up and leave. They had to be persuaded through freedom, as symbolized by their newly acquired time and money, two things that they had not had full control over in many years. This was meant as the initial progression out of slavery and ultimately to Torah and finally to Eretz Yisrael, the land which is provided in order to fulfill the Torah to the highest degree.

והיה הדם לכם לאת על הבתים אשר אתם שם וראיתי את הדם ופסחתי עלכם ולא יהיה בכם נגף למשחית בהכתי בארץ מצרים

“The blood will be a sign for you upon the houses where you are; and I will see the blood and I shall pass over you; there will not be a plague among you, to destroy, when I strike in the land of Egypt” (12:13)

Upon inspection of the pesukim that describe the plague of the firstborn, there seem to be some inconsistencies in the narrative. Hashem says "I will smite the firstborn of Egypt, but I will not allow the destroying plague to enter the houses." What is the source of the plague, Hashem Himself or a terrible plague? If Hashem is carrying out the judgment Himself, why would the Jews need any special protection? Hashem knows who to kill and who to spare?! Additionally, the posuk in Tehillim says, "To smite Egypt with their firstborn." What does it mean that Egypt was punished "with their firstborn?" Also, how could it possibly be that there was "no house without a dead person?" Not every household necessarily had a firstborn male child?

Rabbi Meir Fulda of Yeshiva University quotes the answer of the Bais HaLevi who says that there were two different things that happened. First, Hashem smote every firstborn Himself. Then, Hashem caused every corpse to miraculously putrify instantaneously and that triggered a natural plague that was highly contagious, similar to the bubonic plague of the Middle Ages. This plague was indiscriminate and spread like wildfire. This was the plague that the Bnei Yisrael had to be protected from because the plague naturally affected whomever it encountered. Hashem was indeed precise, but the plague that ensued was unpredictable and thus the Jews required Hashem's miraculous protection so that the plague should pass over them.

Now we can also answer the other two questions. The Egyptians were smitten with their firstborn because their corpses set off widespread death throughout Egypt. Furthermore, there was indeed no house without a dead person. Even in those houses that had no firstborn male child contained someone who fell victim to the natural plague. This also explains why the Egyptians drove the Jews out of Egypt saying, "we will all die." They were not afraid of the supernatural death with which Hashem slew the firstborn. They were afraid that the plague would get them and they knew that the plague would stop once the Jews had left them.

ושמרתם את המצות כי בעצם היום הזה הוצאתי את צבאותיכם מארץ מצרים ושמרתם את היום הזה לדרתכם חקת עולם

“You shall safeguard the matzos, for on this very day I will have taken your legions out of the land of Egypt; you shall observe this day for your generations as an eternal decree” (12:17)

Rashi points out that the word “matzos” can also be read as “mitzvos.” From this comparison of matzos to mitzvos, Chazal say, “If a mitzvah comes into your hand, do not let it become chametz,” i.e. if you get a chance to do a mitzvah, be sure to do it right away. Why is it important to do mitzvos right away? Just as the Jewish people were redeemed at a precise moment, a mitzvah may only come around for a brief moment. If one passes up the opportunity to do the mitzvah, he may never get a second chance. Something might come up or the necessity to do the mitzvah might go away. On Chanukah, the Jews lost their right to do mitzvos as a punishment for having no interest in doing mitzvos. If we do not show interest in performing mitzvos, we may not get a chance when we do want to do mitzvos.

והגדת לבנך ביום ההוא לאמר בעבור זה עשה ה' לי בצאתי ממצרים

“And you shall tell your son on that day, saying: It is on account of this that Hashem did for me when I left Egypt” (13:8)

Rashi says that "it is on account of this" means that Hashem took us out "in order to fulfill His will, such as these mitzvos of Pesach, matza and maror." R' Yerucham Levovitz, former mashgiach of the Mir Yeshiva in Europe, writes that Rashi gives us an insight into the connection between the exodus and the mitzvos. Matzah and maror were not given to remind us of the exodus, but the exodus happened to allow for the fulfillment of mitzvos such as matzah and maror. "This" refers to the ability to do all mitzvos. The reason behind the mitzvos is not the exodus. The exodus provided the ability to do the mitzvos.

Similarly, we can say that when blessings are bestowed upon us today, it might not be because of what we have done in the past to earn the blessings. It may be given to us because of what we will make with the gift, what will do with it in the future. We must view the blessings that Hashem provides us with in terms of the future and think about what we can use the blessings for.

והיה לאות על ידכה ולטוטפת בין עיניך כי בחזק יד הוציאנו ה' ממצרים

“And it shall be for a sign upon your arm, and for headpieces between your eyes, for with a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt” (13:16)

What is special about these last two sections of the parsha that they should be placed inside of our tefillin alongside the two parshiyos of שמע and שמוע? והיה אם שמוע? The answer is that the theme of these two sections is that Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim with a mighty hand. As a result of Yetzias Mitzrayim, the people will want to serve Hashem as a result of recognizing his great power and strength, rather than because of reward or punishment. This is what Chazal call “יראת הרוממות,” “fear of the loftiness of Hashem,” as opposed to “יראת העונש,” “fear of punishment.” יראת הרוממות is certainly the preferable way in which to serve Hashem because there is no ulterior motive other than the recognition of Hashem's greatness and the resultant desire to serve Him. When we contemplate the awesomeness of Hashem, it will bring us to constant service of Him. The tefillin serves as that reminder of the strength that Hashem displayed in Mitzrayim and reminds us that we should strive to serve Hashem at all times as a result of the recognition of this power. This is why these two sections are placed inside the tefillin.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

Shiur given by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

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