

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת וארא

וגם הקמתי את בריתי אתם לתת להם את ארץ כנען את ארץ מגריהם אשר גרו בה
**“And also, I established My covenant with them to give them the land of
Canaan, the land of their sojournings in which they sojourned” (6:4)**

Hashem told Moshe that He would fulfill his oath to give Eretz Yisrael to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov. How could Hashem promise that they would personally own the land if they were no longer alive? This is cited by the Gemara in Sanhedrin 90b as a Biblical source for that future day when the dead will return to life, Techiyas Hameisim, which is one of the Rambam’s thirteen major principles of faith. It is then that they will receive ownership of the land. It is important for us to look forward to that special day which will occur after the arrival of Moshiach and we pray three times every day that it take place soon.

We are fortunate to live in a country where we can live comfortably, but this makes it difficult for us to longingly await the arrival of Moshiach. This was not a challenge for our ancestors during the more difficult phases of our exile. Tzror HaMor asks: Why did Hashem make life very bitter for the Jews in Egypt? Had they been able to live happily, they would have prospered and felt right at home. They would have had no interest in going to Eretz Yisrael. In fact, some Jews complained that they would rather go back to Egypt during the challenging times in the desert. To make sure that they would leave Egypt when the time came, Hashem subjected them to harsh slavery which made them desperate to get out. Today, we hope to never need such persecution to force us into yearning for redemption. Despite our comfort, we should remember that exile is temporary and that we are not yet in our true home.

וַיִּקַּח עַמְרָם אֶת יוֹכָבֵד דִּדְתוֹ לֹא לְאִשָּׁה וַתֵּלֶד לּוֹ אֶת אֶהֱרֹן וְאֶת מֹשֶׁה וּשְׁנֵי חֵי עַמְרָם
שָׁבַע וּשְׁלֹשִׁים וּמֵאָת שָׁנָה

“Amram took Yocheved, his aunt, as his wife, and she bore him Aharon and Moshe, and the years of Amram's life were one hundred thirty-seven years” (6:20)

In last week's shiur, we discussed a few reasons why the Torah did not name Moshe's parents at the time of his birth. In this week's parsha, R' Moshe Feinstein addresses this question. He writes that the reason why Moshe's parents are named after he became the redeemer and not earlier is to teach us that parents cannot take pride in having a talented child unless they help him develop those talents. When Moshe was born, light filled the house and it was quickly clear that he was an exceptional child with sky-high potential. But at that point, his parents are not yet named and receive no distinction for being Moshe's parents. Parents should not assume that a child with innate abilities will realize his full potential. They must work with the child to develop those skills, give him extra attention, study with him and discipline him so that he will indeed become the person that he is capable of being. Then the parents can consider themselves successful. It was only after Moshe became the leader of the Jewish people that his parents are identified by name and given credit for having such a son.

הוא אהרן ומשה אשר אמר ה' להם הוציאו את בני ישראל מארץ מצרים על צבאתם

“That is Aharon and Moshe, to whom Hashem said: Take the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions” (6:26)

The Torah first mentions Aharon before Moshe and later puts Moshe ahead of Aharon. Why is the sequence sometimes one way and sometimes the other? Rashi says that this illustrates how Moshe and Aharon were equally great. R' Moshe Feinstein adds that Moshe Rabbeinu, the greatest prophet of all time, was indisputably on a higher level than his brother Aharon. Nevertheless, because Aharon also reached the potential that Hashem had given him, he is considered equal to Moshe in stature. Greatness is measured by how a person uses the potential that Hashem has given him. Hashem does not expect everyone to be the same, only that each individual achieve the maximum that he can with the abilities that Hashem has granted him.

וּמֹשֶׁה בֶּן שְׁמֹנִים וְאַהֲרֹן בֶּן שְׁלֹשׁ וּשְׁמֹנִים וְשָׁנָה בְּדַבְּרָם אֶל פַּרְעֹה

“And Moshe was eighty years old, and Aharon was eighty-three years old when they spoke to Pharaoh” (7:7)

Why did the Torah consider it important to mention the ages of Moshe and Aharon? After all, no detail is mentioned in the Torah unless we can learn something from it. Seforno writes: “Despite their advanced age, they got up early and rushed to fulfill the will of their Creator.” No matter how old we are or how tired we feel, when there is a job that needs to be done, we need to do it with the same diligence, passion, and eagerness as young people full of excitement. There are no excuses to allow ourselves to become lethargic in the way that we serve Hashem. When Hashem blesses us with the gift of life and waking up in the morning for another day, it is so that we will continue to serve Him energetically.

וַיָּבֹאוּ מֹשֶׁה וְאַהֲרֹן אֶל פַּרְעֹה וַיַּעֲשׂוּ כִּן כַּאֲשֶׁר צִוָּה ה' וַיִּשְׁלַךְ אַהֲרֹן אֶת מַטְהוֹ לִפְנֵי פַרְעֹה וּלְפָנָי עֲבָדָיו וַיְהִי לְתַנִּין

“Moshe and Aharon came to Pharaoh, and they did so, as Hashem had commanded; Aharon cast his staff before Pharaoh and before his servants, and it became a serpent” (7:10)

Why did Hashem have Moshe’s staff transform into a snake and not a different creature? Rabbeinu Bachya says that this was meant to remind Pharaoh of the snake at the time of creation who spoke ill of Hashem to Chava and was punished for its slanderous words. This message was relevant to Pharaoh because he too had mocked Hashem by exclaiming “Who is Hashem that I should listen to His voice?” The sign of the snake was a way to tell Pharaoh that he would be punished for his evil words. We also find a similar concept in Parshas Chukas, when Hashem sent poisonous snakes to punish the Jews after they had spoken badly about Hashem and the special gifts that he had given them (Bamidbar 21:4-9).

Rabbeinu Bachya also suggests that the snake symbolizes Pharaoh’s response to the plagues. Just as a snake alternates between curling up and straightening out as it slithers, so did Pharaoh alternate between capitulating to Moshe’s requests and reneging on his prior commitments after each

plague, first saying that he would let the Jews go in order to make the plague stop and then changing his mind once things settled down.

וַיִּשְׁלִיכוּ אִישׁ מִטֵּהוּ וַיְהִיוּ לְתַנִּינִים וַיִּבְלַע מִטֵּה אַהֲרֹן אֶת מִטֵּהוֹ

“Each one of them cast down his staff, and they became serpents; but Aharon's staff swallowed their staffs” (7:12)

When Aharon picked the snake up from the floor, it reverted back to being a stick. R' Meir Shapiro explains that the stick of a holy person is a metaphor for a good person who serves Hashem, but if he is tossed into the vicinity of Pharaoh, he will be influenced and turn bad, like the snake which represents evil. However, when a person who is stuck in his sinful ways establishes a connection with a holy person, he will be able to become good. Our environment, whether positive or negative, plays a large role in determining our ability to grow spiritually.

וַיְהִי בָרָד וְאֵשׁ מְתַלַּקֶמֶת בְּתוֹךְ הַבָּרָד כָּבֵד מְאֹד אֲשֶׁר לֹא הָיָה כָּמֹהוּ בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם
מֵאֲזֻ הָיְתָה לְגוֹי

“And there was hail, and fire flaming within the hail, very heavy, the likes of which had never been throughout the entire land of Egypt since it had become a nation” (9:24)

Rashi points out the miraculous nature of the hail, in which fire and water coexisted in order to fulfill the will of their Creator and punish the Egyptians. Hashem created this unnatural phenomenon to show that the world is not on autopilot. Even nature is really controlled by Hashem and He can bend it to His will at any time. This is also why when Moshe prayed to Hashem for the hail to end, the hailstones stopped frozen in mid-air. Nothing should be taken for granted, not even gravity. Every second that we are alive, every event that happens in this world only happens because Hashem wants it to be so.

Another lesson that we can draw from the combination of fire and ice is that two opposites can come together to do the will of Hashem. Sometimes our communities contain differing viewpoints, but we have to put those aside to come together and serve Hashem as one. Similarly, a family may have individuals who have different ideas from one another or a

married couple may have disagreements. The hail teaches us that we should be able to work through our differences with others to preserve our relationships and serve Hashem together.

וַיֵּרָא פַרְעֹה כִּי חָדַל הַמָּטֶר וְהַבָּרָד וְהַקֶּלֶת וַיִּסָּף לַחֲטָא וַיִּכְבֵּד לִבּוֹ הוּא וְעַבְדָּיו
“And Pharaoh saw that the rain, the hail, and the thunder had ceased; so he continued to sin, and he strengthened his heart, he and his servants” (9:34)

Pharaoh asked Moshe to pray for the end of the plague and his prayer made the hail stop. But once it was over, Pharaoh hardened his heart again. Rabbeinu Bachya writes that this is the way of wicked people. When things are bad, they consider changing, but as soon as life is comfortable again, they abandon all thoughts of self-improvement and fall back into old habits. We should never be like that. In good times, we should remain focused on serving Hashem. If we experience difficulties and as a result make commitments to Hashem, we should stick to them even when life improves.

This parsha teaches us about the importance of choices. Each time Hashem sent a plague upon Egypt, Pharaoh had the chance to change. Each time, he chose to ignore the message. The Rambam writes that after a number of plagues came and went, Pharaoh’s sins were considered so great that Hashem took away his ability to repent because he had reached a point of no return. Repentance is a privilege that Hashem grants us if we choose to take advantage of it, but if a person’s sins are so great, he will lose that gift. The average person will rarely reach this level and we always have the opportunity to choose to change ourselves.

During the period of Greek persecution, the Greek government banned a number of mitzvos, one of which was Rosh Chodesh. They understood that the beginning of a new month was an opportunity for renewal and rejuvenation. Taking that day away from the Jewish people would ensure that they remained stuck in their bad habits.

We can avoid getting stuck in our own habits in a few different ways. One idea is to make a commitment to focus on a mitzvah that we are not usually careful about. Another strategy is to start studying a new Torah book that we have never learned before, which will give us a new feeling of

excitement and a new perspective. A third idea is to pray for others to return to Hashem. In our Shemone Esrei, we ask Hashem to “bring us back and we will return,” in the plural form. If we think about the spiritual welfare of those around us, we will also improve as a result.

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