

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת וארא

והבאתי אתכם אל הארץ אשר נשאתי את ידי לתת אתה לאברהם ליצחק וליעקב
ונתתי אתה לכם מורשה אני ה'

“I shall bring you to the land about which I raised My hand to give it to Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov; and I shall give it to you as a heritage - I am Hashem” (6:8)

The Or HaChaim points out that, despite Hashem's promise to bring them to Eretz Yisrael, the people of that generation did not enter the land. They all died in the wilderness. How could this be? How is it that Hashem, whose seal is truth and is the very paradigm of truth, did not keep his promise? The answer is based on the previous posuk which says that "you shall know that I am Hashem who took you out of Egypt." If you recognize this, then Hashem says in the next posuk that "I shall bring you to the land." This implies that if you do not recognize this, then you did not hold up your end of the deal. Hashem did not go back on His word. Rather, the people failed to fulfill the precondition that would have allowed them to enter the land. When they sinned in the wilderness and denied the fact that Hashem was protecting them, they forfeited the right to go to Eretz Yisrael.

כה אמר ה' בזאת תדע כי אני ה' הנה אנכי מכה במטה אשר בידי על המים אשר
ביאר ונהפכו לדם

“So says Hashem: Through this shall you know that I am Hashem; behold, with the staff that is in my hand I shall strike the waters that are in the river and they shall change to blood” (7:17)

The Tzror Hamor writes that the plagues with which Hashem smote the Egyptians were "middah keneged middah," punishments which corresponded directly to their wrongdoing. The Egyptians harmed the Jews physically, financially and mortally. The Egyptians suffered all three types of afflictions through the plagues. The blood, pestilence, hail and locusts hurt their property and their wealth. The frogs, lice, wild animals, boils and darkness caused them physical pain and discomfort. Finally, many of them died in the death of the firstborn.

Often, we find that Hashem rewards and punishes people in a way that directly corresponds to his actions. In his introduction to Hilchos Shabbos in the Mishna Berura (Volume 3), the Chofetz Chaim writes that if a person sins with a certain part of his body, that limb will be deficient when he comes back to life during Techiyas Hameisim. Then he will be ashamed because everyone will know what his sins were during his lifetime. However, he follows that by quoting the statement of Chazal that one who keeps Shabbos according to all its laws can thereby earn an atonement for all of his sins. Therefore, the Chofetz Chaim urges every individual to learn the laws of Shabbos thoroughly because of its great power to achieve forgiveness. (See also the first three chapters of the Chofetz Chaim's sefer "Shem Olam" in which he discusses this statement of Chazal in greater detail.)

ויאמר ה' אל משה אמר אל אהרן נטה את מטך והך את עפר הארץ והיה לכנם בכל ארץ מצרים

“Hashem said to Moshe: Say to Aharon: Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the land; it shall become lice throughout the land of Egypt” (8:12)

Why did Aharon, not Moshe, hit the river and the dirt to begin the first three plagues? Rashi explains that Moshe was recognizing the protection that the river and the dirt had afforded him when he had been placed in the river as a baby and when he buried the Egyptian that he killed in the dirt. In the words of the gemara, “One should not throw a rock in a well from which he drank.”

The Shita Mekubetzes on Bava Kama 92b cites a story about the Rif, a Rishon who lived in Spain in eleventh century. The Rif was sick and he used a certain bathhouse as part of his healing process. Later on, the owner of this bathhouse fell on hard times and his bankruptcy case came before the Rif. He refused to take the case, which would cause the man harm, saying that if he owed a debt of gratitude to the baths for healing him even though they have no feelings, certainly the same would apply to its owner, who has feelings. When someone does something good for you, you must recognize and remember that. Because of this, the Rif felt that he could not remain impartial in this case. He also added that if one owes a debt of gratitude to a person who acts kindly toward him, certainly he must be grateful to Hashem, who provides for us every day, and we must have appreciation for that as well.

On Friday night, we cover the challah so as not to “embarrass” the challah when we make the brocha of “borei pri hagafen” first during kiddush. R' Hershel Schachter explains that the challah will obviously not really be embarrassed because it is an inanimate object. However, we still do this because by avoiding “embarrassing” the challah, we will teach ourselves to have sensitivity toward others.

ויאמרו החרטמים אל פרעה אצבע אלקים הוא ויחזק לב פרעה ולא שמע אליהם כאשר דבר ה'

“The sorcerers said to Pharaoh: It is a finger of Hashem; but Pharaoh's heart was strong and he did not heed them, as Hashem had spoken” (8:15)

R' Moshe Feinstein points out that even when they were able to replicate the plagues, they could not do it in such a way where they differentiated between the Jews and Egyptians. They could not exactly copy the way in which Hashem had wrought the plague. Even so, they failed to take the miracles to heart. Later, when even the sorcerers admitted that the hand of Hashem was bringing the miraculous plagues, Pharaoh refused to heed them. We have to be different than Pharaoh and take inspiration from miracles and recognize the hand of Hashem in this world. Hashem's providence is continuous and constant. We should always be aware of this fact. Three times a day, in Modim, we thank Hashem "for Your miracles that are with us every day, and for Your wonders and favors in every season - evening, morning and afternoon." We should take note of these words as we say them and truly feel indebted to Hashem for the tremendous kindness that He does for us day in and day out.

ויאמר אליו משה כצאתי את העיר אפרש את כפי אל ה' הקלות יחדלון והברד לא

יהיה עוד למען תדע כי לה' הארץ

“Moshe said to him: When I leave the city I shall spread out my hands to Hashem; the thunder will cease and the hail will no longer be, so that you shall know that the earth is Hashem's” (9:29)

The Ramban notes that Moshe wanted to teach Pharaoh "that the earth is Hashem's" and comments that Pharaoh denied that Hashem created the world. Based on this idea, we can understand a number of things. Hashem punished Pharaoh with ten plagues corresponding to the ten statements through which He created the world (Avos 5:1). This is also why we do many things "zecher litzias mitzrayim", "as a commemoration of the exodus." Since Pharaoh denied Hashem's status as the Creator of the world, Hashem brought plagues which proved him to be so. The exodus was therefore a reinforcement of Hashem's status as the Creator of the world. Whenever we recall the exodus, it is also recalling creation. That is why we say both "zecher lema'ase bereishis" and "zecher litzias mitzrayim" in kiddush on Shabbos. Shabbos commemorates both the original creation and the exodus from Egypt which reinforced that very same idea. Rabbi Friedman suggests that this may also be why the Ten Commandments begins with "I am Hashem, Who took you out of Egypt," rather than "Who created the world," because they both, in effect, mean the same thing.

ויצא משה מעם פרעה את העיר ויפרש כפיו אל ה' ויחדלו הקלות והברד ומטר לא נתן ארצה

“Moshe went out from Pharaoh, from the city, and he stretched out his hands to Hashem; the thunder and hail ceased and the rain did not reach the earth” (9:33)

Rashi comments that the when the posuk says that "the rain did not reach the earth," it means that any hail that was in the process of falling when Moshe davened to Hashem stopped and remained suspended in midair. R' Moshe Feinstein asks: What lesson is this teaching us? He answers that the posuk illustrates how Hashem responded to Moshe's prayer immediately and stopped everything wherever it was at that moment, even if it defied nature. Since there is a mitzvah to follow in the ways of Hashem, we should follow the example of this immediate response when we have the opportunity to do a mitzvah. Sometimes we have to do a mitzvah without thinking about why we are doing it and trying to find excuses. We have to listen to Hashem without questioning. A person should jump at the chance to do a good deed, even if it goes against his nature. This is the example that Hashem set for us by stopping the hail instantly and leaving it in the air.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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