

SHABAT
CHOL HAMOED

PESSAH

APRIL 19TH 2014
NISAN 19TH 5774

541

The Path to Follow

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FOR ALL THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL, THERE WAS LIGHT

Rabbi David Pinto Chlita

It is written, "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Stretch out your hand towards the heavens, and there shall be darkness upon the land of Egypt, and the darkness will be tangible.' Moshe stretched out his hand towards the heavens and there was a thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt for three days. No man could see his brother, nor could anyone rise from his place for three days. But for all the Children of Israel, there was light in their dwellings" (Shemot 10:21-23).

The Sages have explained that this plague consisted of two parts: During the first part, there was thick darkness that lasted for three days, meaning that people could not see one another. Then during the second part, which lasted three more days, there was darkness that was twice as dark. In fact it was so dark that no one could rise from his place, and anyone who was standing could not sit down.

Rashi asks the question, "What was the reason for the plague of darkness? There were evildoers among the Israelites of that generation who did not want to leave Egypt. They died during the plague of darkness so that the Egyptians would not see their downfall and say that Israel is also being struck, just like us. In addition, the Israelites were able to search the [homes of] the Egyptians. They examined the possessions of the Egyptians. When they left Egypt and asked them for those possessions, and the Egyptians replied that they had none, the Israelites told them that they had seen those objects in such-and-such a place."

What exactly is Rashi asking here? We don't find him raising this question about the other plagues. The Kli Yakar states, "When Rashi asks why He inflicted such darkness upon them, and yet he does not ask this question for the other plagues, it is because for all the other plagues, if Pharaoh had wanted to repent during a plague he could have done so. Yet here, no one could rise for three days, and even if he had wanted to repent during those three days, he could not have done so. Why did Hashem do this? It is because, although He had already hardened Pharaoh's heart – meaning before he himself hardened his heart during a plague – it was right to harden it once a plague was over. Yet in regards to the plague of darkness, even if he had wanted to repent during this plague, his repentance would not have stopped it, for it was caused by evildoers among Israel."

This is extraordinary, showing us that at any time, even when G-d punishes a person, as wicked as he may be, he can always repent, even while being punished. Therefore why did G-d strike the Egyptians with darkness, a plague whose nature was such that, even if the Egyptians had wanted to repent, they would have been unable to? The answer is that this plague was meant solely for the Children of Israel. As Rashi states, there were two reasons for this: The first concerned the wicked among Israel, and the second concerned the righteous among Israel. Concerning the wicked, the plague allowed G-d to kill them without the Egyptians seeing their downfall, and concerning the

righteous, the plague allowed them to fulfill what Hashem had promised Abraham: "Afterwards they will leave with great wealth" (Bereshith 15:14).

We see something interesting after the plague of darkness. In general, there was a certain interval between each plague, from the time that Hashem removed one plague from Egypt to the time that Moshe came to Pharaoh and threatened him with another plague. This was not the case, however, between the plague of darkness and the **plague of the firstborn**. After Hashem removed the plague of darkness from the Egyptians, Moshe said to Pharaoh: "I will never see your face again" (Shemot 10:29). At that point, Hashem immediately told Moshe about the **plague of the firstborn**. Isn't this surprising? Why did Hashem not wait a few days, in order to create an interval between the two, between one misfortune and the other, between one plague and the next?

According to what we have said, this is perfectly understandable. It is because the plague of darkness was not meant primarily for Egypt, but for the Children of Israel. Hence it would not have been right for Hashem to strike the Egyptians in order for them to repent, since they had already crossed the line and the time had come for the Children of Israel to leave Egypt. Furthermore, the plague of darkness was primarily meant for the wicked among Israel, in order for the Egyptians not to rejoice in their downfall. It was also meant for the righteous among Israel, in order for them to know where the Egyptians hid their treasures. If Hashem had waited a sufficiently long time between the plague of darkness and the plague of the firstborn, none of these goals would have been achieved, for the Egyptians would have realized that four fifths of the Children of Israel had perished, and they would have understood that G-d had punished them earlier. The Egyptians would therefore have rejoiced and said: "They too were struck as we were." In regards to the righteous, the Sages have, as we know, said about coins: "Why are certain coins called zuzim? Because they are removed zuzim from one and given to another" (Bamidbar Rabba 22:8). Had there not been a sufficient interval between the plague of the firstborn and the plague of darkness, it is possible that the Egyptians would have moved their gold and silver from one hiding spot to another, and the plague of darkness would therefore not have achieved its main objective.

In such a case, namely that the plague of darkness was meant primarily for the Children of Israel, we need to understand why such a plague was necessary, a plague by which G-d overturned all the laws of Creation, and why there was such complete, thick darkness on one side, and yet light for the Jews. It would have been enough to strike the Egyptians with blindness so as to prevent them from seeing or doing anything, just as the angels struck the inhabitants Sodom when they visited Lot. Why did G-d modify all the laws of nature?

We may say, quite simply, that this is precisely what Hashem wanted to show the Children of Israel. He wanted



Publication of
HEVRAT PINTO

Under the Direction of
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Pinto Shlita**

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to show them that He is the Master of all there is. He is the Creator, Who reigns over the entire universe, and Who is the source behind all causes, which He guides. As the verse states, "Hashem said to Moshe, 'Come to Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart, and the heart of his servants so that I can put these signs of Mine in their midst, that you may tell in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have made a mockery of Egypt, and My signs that I placed among them – that you may know that I am Hashem'" (Shemot 10:1-2). The plague of darkness was primarily aimed at something else, namely "that you" – i.e., the Children of Israel – "may know that I am Hashem." This needed to be shown to the Children of Israel as well, to prevent them from being influenced by the corrupt atmosphere that existed in Egypt, by the spirit of impurity that reigned there, and by the idolatry that was practiced there. This understanding was Hashem's objective, to demonstrate that G-d controls all of nature, which can generate opposites at the same time – light and darkness – providing light to some and darkness to others.

We may also say, and this teaching applies to every generation, that G-d wanted to show the Children of Israel that even when a person thinks that darkness

covers the earth, that everything is dark, and that G-d is completely absent, it is precisely in such a situation that "for all the Children of Israel, there was light in their dwellings." Even when a person believes that he is in the most difficult situation – when darkness surrounds him on all sides, hopelessness overcomes him, and a sharp sword is already on his neck – he must firmly believe that a ray of light may appear even in such complete darkness.

The Sages have said that sometimes, darkness is the cause of light. As King David said, "I raise my eyes to the mountain; me'ayin [from where] will my help come?" (Tehillim 121:1). Sometimes it is precisely me'ayin – from ayin ("nothing"), meaning from an absence, from the greatest darkness – that deliverance springs forth. This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to teach the Children of Israel before they left Egypt. In fact for the Children of Israel, even in the deepest darkness, there is always "light in their dwellings." There is always light wherever they go, for G-d can always bring deliverance, everywhere and in every circumstance. Even when a sharp sword is placed on a person's neck, he should not lose hope of Divine mercy, for mercy belongs to Him!

Customs and their Origins

Mimouna

Following the eighth day of Passover, North African Jews gather for the elaborate celebration of Mimouna. In this spiritually uplifting festivity, they gather around tables filled with delicious dishes and greet one another with wishes of blessing and success, with siman tov and mazal tov.

The name of this celebration, Mimouna, is derived from the term *mimun*, the translation of which is *mazel tov*. It is meant as a good omen for the summertime, that it may be blessed with "good luck" (*mazel tov*). In the words of the gaon Rabbi Shalom Messas Zatzal, the Rav of Jerusalem: "[It is] to prepare us for the summer months, when we can harvest and engage in business, and also store up plentiful flour for the winter. We also prepare enough to eat for the wintertime, as well as meat fried in oil and homemade wine, for there is no wine to sell during the winter, or it is very expensive. This is why we wish each other: 'Mazel tov, may you make large profits and succeed.'"

This is how Rabbi David Ovadia (Kehilat Sefru) describes the celebration of Mimouna in Morocco: "At the end of Pesach, we set tables with milk, with butter and vegetables, such as green ears of wheat and flowers. Families visit one another, and people especially go visit a rav or their oldest family member to receive a blessing. Each family acts according to its own particular customs. Some sprinkle milk on the forehead of the person receiving a blessing, others give him a date stuffed with butter and honey, while others prepare donuts made with chametz for their guests. Kohanim go from house to house until they reach the home of their rav to recite Birkat Kohanim. All the men of the household read, using their standard melody, a certain number of verses from Sefer Mishlei. These verses are then repeated in the native language, in order for women and children to understand. Next, the person reciting the blessing begins *mishaberach* and blesses everyone there. People kiss the hand of the rav and return home. All this takes place amid modesty and purity."

We have an older testimony to this celebration from Rabbi Haim Falagi Zatzal, who said: "On the night that Pesach ends, we usually display ears of wheat in our homes, and we also place them on the head, for on Pesach we are judged in regards to the harvest. We do this as a good omen, for an abundant harvest during the year."

Rabbi Avraham Hamoy Zatzal describes his impressions of the Mimouna celebration, writing the following:

"In numerous places, on the night when the holiday ends, we normally take herbs and ears of wheat and place them on the head, as is our custom in Aleppo, as well as in Constantinople, Izmir, and other places. People would also throw them in every corner of the house and say, 'May there be blessing and success in the work of our hands.'"

Matzah For Mimouna

At the end of Pesach, we also start to prepare the first chametz, the chametz that rises without leaven and without yeast, with a tallit covering the bowl in which the dough is placed. The Jews of Marakesh kept what remained of the wine from the "glass of Eliyahu HaNavi," pouring it into the first dough that was prepared at the end of the holiday.

Kneading the dough was a special honor reserved for the most prominent woman in the home. When the time came to knead it, the members of the family sang songs and read *mishnayot* from *Pirkei Avoth*.

Among the Jews of Meknes, people remember the extraordinary story of how the community was saved at the end of Pesach. The governor of the city, who was extremely fond of the Jewish community and quite familiar with its customs and traditions, decided to distribute yeast every year to the people at the end of Pesach. In this way, they would not have to wait long to prepare leavened dough.

The governor's assistant did not have a favorable view of this initiative, and he devised a sinister plot: To poison the large quantity of leaven that was destined for the Jewish community, leaven that the governor distributed to Jews every year.

The Rav of the community was informed of this sinister plot in a dream, and during the sermon that he gave to the community during Pesach, he declared that for that year, people must eat matzah during Mimouna. No one was to eat chametz.

When the governor of the city learned of this, he immediately summoned the Rav to ask him why Jews refused to use the leaven that he had distributed to them. To answer this question, the Rav asked the governor to give some of the leaven, which his assistant had distributed, to a dog that was in the courtyard.

A few minutes after eating the poisoned leaven, the dog collapsed and died. The plot of the governor's assistant was thus publicly revealed, he was hanged, and the community rejoiced.

Walls of Water

It is written, “To Him Who divides the Sea of Reeds into parts” (Tehillim 136:13).

I heard from the gaon Rabbi Eliezer Gordon Zatzal, the Av Beit Din and Ram of Telz, that we read the Torah passage, “the water was like a wall on their right and on their left” (Shemot 14:29) with a particular melody in order to discredit the idea of unbelievers that the miracle of the slitting of the sea resulted from a low tide. Hence we highlight the fact that the water did not diminish in height in any way, but stood like a wall on their right and on their left.

Yet besides the testimony of the Torah, it would be foolish to say that we can cross the sea at a time when deep waters lose a little of their depth. That makes no sense.

– Oznaim LaTorah

To Regard Himself

The Sages teach, “In every generation, a person is obligated to regard himself as if he had come out of Egypt” (Mishnah, Pesachim 116b).

Kabbalists have said that every year on the night of Pesach, the forces of purity are drawn and separated from the forces of impurity, adding themselves to holiness and cleaving to it. This represents the very essence of the exodus from Egypt.

Thus the wicked Bilam said, “Behold, the people coming out of Egypt” (Bamidbar 22:11) – there is not just one exodus at the beginning. Rather, each year they are “coming out of Egypt.”

– Ohr HaChaim

A Large Family

It is written, “There we shall eat from the zevachim and from the pesach” (Passover Haggadah).

The zevachim (peace offerings) are the korban chagigah [festival offering] made on Nissan 14. A korban chagigah was not obligatory, but was only required when a family was large enough. Yet it is this very fact which is included in this prayer, that a family be large, in which case it will be necessary to bring zevachim, a korban chagigah, along with the pesach offering.

– Aruch HaShulchan

Devotion

It is written, “Judah becomes His Sanctuary” (Tehillim 114:2).

One’s devotion must not be accompanied by unnecessary deliberation and thought, as the Chasid Ya’avetz states, for the Jews who were expelled from Spain were simple people, and they did not deliberate much. Rather, they believed with a simple faith, and they were willing to give up their lives rather than to deny their religion, for excessive deliberation is liable to prevent man from giving up his life.

Such was the way in which Nachshon ben Amminadav, from the tribe of Judah, was willing to give up his life when the Children of Israel stood by the Sea of Reeds. Such was also the way of Hur, the son of Miriam, when the Children of Israel sought to worship the golden calf. Hence when G-d chose the person through whom the Sanctuary would be built, He said: “See, I have called by name Betzalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, from the tribe of Judah” (Shemot 31:2). This tells us that because his ancestors had not excessively deliberated or weighed

the pros and cons before offering up their lives, Betzalel was chosen to build the Sanctuary.

– Meshech Chochma

The Small and the Great

It is written, “He will bless those who fear Hashem, the small and the great” (Tehillim 115:13).

“The small and the great” – precisely, for Hashem only blesses them when the small walk with the great, take advice from them, and act according to their directives. However if the small only do what they think is right, asking nothing from the great and wanting to proceed according to their own ways, then a blessing is not said for them!

– Ta’ama D’Kra

In the Light of the Parsha

A Blow to Egypt and a Healing Balm to Israel

It is written, “The Children of Israel went out beyad ramah [with a high hand]” (Shemot 14:8).

Why is this written? If it is to tell us that they left by force, the Torah already states: “For with a strong hand Hashem removed you from Egypt” (Shemot 13:9) and, “For with a strong hand Hashem removed us from Egypt” (v.16). Therefore why mention beyad ramah? If it is to tell us that the Holy One, blessed be He, brought them out and they were not afraid of the Egyptians, the Torah already states: “It happened on that very day, Hashem took the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt by their armies” (Shemot 12:51).

This relates to what the Sages have said, namely that Pharaoh did not recognize that Hashem brings about both good and evil. Hence He sent plagues upon Pharaoh in order for him to know that it is G-d Himself Who brings good and evil. It is written, “Hashem will strike Egypt, striking and healing” (Isaiah 19:22), and the Sages have said that this refers to striking Egypt and healing Israel (Zohar II:36a). In other words, within a single plague there was a blow to one and healing to another, teaching us that G-d Himself would bring good to those who do His will, and evil to those who transgress it.

In this regard we read, “The Children of Israel went out beyad ramah [with a high hand]” – the term ramah being formed by the same letters as marah (“bitter”), the hand being triumphant for Israel yet bitter for Egypt. Just as the plagues in the land of Egypt constituted a blow to the Egyptians but a healing balm to Israel, likewise the plagues by the sea were a blow to the Egyptians and a healing balm to Israel. In this spirit it is said, “The pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and went behind them. It came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel, and there were cloud and darkness, and it illuminated the night, and one did not draw near the other all night long” (Shemot 14:19-20). Targum Yonatan writes that the cloud was half light and half dark, with one side of the cloud bringing darkness to the camp of Egypt and the other side bringing light to the camp of Israel. In this regard it is said, “one did not draw near the other all the night,” teaching us that Hashem could do good to one while doing evil to the other – all by the very same thing – in such a way that they did not approach one another. It was possible for one to be struck and the other to be healed by the very same thing, which was not contradictory.

Who Obtained Flour for the Residents of Jerusalem?

The Jewish population of the holy city of Jerusalem was living during a difficult time. A famine struck the land that year, and the sky was like iron and the earth like bronze. Not a drop of rain moistened the ground, trees did not yield their fruit, and no greenery or firstfruits could be found.

When the famine arrived, it also brought inflation with it. One rotel [ancient measure] of flour cost an entire gold dinar, and even at that price it was impossible to find. The meager harvests of the previous year had already been consumed, and the effects of the famine were visible on the gaunt faces of the people. The fear of tomorrow appeared in their lifeless eyes. Jews were not only worried about the intense famine that struck them, but also about matzot for Pesach: Where were they going to find wheat that had been supervised in order to make shmura matzah?

In normal years, when the time came for harvesting wheat, the leaders and prominent members of the community would go out into the fields and harvest wheat with joy. They would then bring the harvest into town and store it in granaries protected from rain and moisture. They anxiously waited until Purim, and then took out the wheat and milled it into flour, which they distributed to the residents of Jerusalem.

That year, however, there was no harvest! Only bushes could be found in the fields. Hence there was no supervised wheat, and therefore no supervised flour, meaning that people would have to settle on regular matzah.

Yet was there even regular matzah? Nothing was less certain! There was still a little wheat left in the country, but it was very expensive, and there was no longer a cent left in the community coffers. The “wheat market” had already closed, and warehouses in the community remained empty and desolate.

Worry in His Heart

During that time, the leader of the community in Jerusalem was Rabbi Israel of Shklov, a student of the Vilna Gaon. Now Rabbi Israel was worried. His face was somber and his back hunched over on account of the tremendous burden that weighed on him. He had already lived through many difficult times, but things were never as bad as this. However he still hoped to receive help from Jews living in the Diaspora, who more than once had already demonstrated their devotion to their brothers in the Holy Land, considering them as their representatives for the mitzvah to live there. Yet would help arrive in time? Would they still be able to purchase wheat to make matzot?

One day towards evening, Rabbi Israel suddenly heard camel bells chiming near his home. He approached the window and saw a caravan of camels loaded with merchandise, and being led by an Arab. Even before Rabbi Israel had time to understand where such a caravan was coming from, the Arab had already made his way to his home and said: “Rabbi, are you the leader of the Jews of Jerusalem? I have wheat to sell and I know that Jews need it to prepare unleavened bread for Passover. That’s why I’ve brought some. I thought you might buy some from me at a suitable price.”

Rabbi Israel replied with a sigh, “We do indeed need wheat, and we would have generously bought it from you. However we don’t have any money. Community funds are completely empty!”

The Arab thought for a moment before making a suggestion: “I’m ready to wait for the money. Just promise me that I’ll get paid.”

“Alright,” Rabbi Israel said to him. “Let’s agree on a payment date.”

“On the eve or the end of Passover,” the Arab replied. “Now please open your granaries so my workers can unload the merchandise.”

The warehouses near the home of the Rav were opened and the Arab workers began to quickly unload sacks of wheat. Numerous Jews who hurried to the spot began to help them.

In the meantime, the day was drawing to a close and the Rav went to get some candles to provide light for the workers. Yet upon his return, there was no trace of the Arabs or their camels.

Rabbi Israel looked upon the warehouses with satisfaction, for they were now full. However worry was still gnawing away at his heart: How was he going to pay what he owed to the seller, who had disappeared even before they had time to agree on a price? Who knows whether he would demand an exorbitant price that was beyond the Rav’s means?

Rabbi Israel put an effort into obtaining some sizeable funds, turning to the Jews of the Diaspora for urgent help.

And help did arrive: Even before the payment date that he had agreed upon with the Arab, the moneybag was already at Rabbi Israel’s home ready to pay him for the wheat.

The wheat he had obtained was more than enough for the needs of the community. Everyone was granted enough wheat in keeping with the size of his family, and there was enough remaining in the warehouses to distribute after Pesach.

The Mystery

The eve of Pesach arrived. As all the Jews of Jerusalem made their way to the Kotel, as they did every year, Rabbi Israel stayed home. He waited for the Arab merchant to return for his money. The day drew to a close, but the Arab still had not arrived. Even at the end of Pesach, Rabbi Israel waited for him, but he failed to come.

For years, Rabbi Israel kept the moneybag for the Arab who had sold him wheat. Yet during all that time, he heard nothing of him.

When his time came to leave this world, Rabbi Israel summoned his son-in-law and said to him: “I’ve always kept this money to pay the Arab who sold us wheat during that year of famine. Keep it and don’t touch it for ten years; perhaps he will return to claim his money. After that time, if he has still not come, you can use it to help the poor. And in order to maintain peace, use it to help needy Arabs as well.”

This Arab, who had disappeared under extraordinary circumstances, never returned to claim his money. Who was he? It’s a mystery. Who really was he? To this day, nobody knows.

Guard Your Tongue

A Chance to Calm Him

There is another instance in which it is a mitzvah to listen to a person speaking Lashon Harah. For example, if a person wants to complain about what someone did to him, and we know that this person will listen to us, meaning that we have a chance to calm him in such a way that he will no longer say the same thing to others, then we will have increased peace in Israel.

Nevertheless, we should be extremely careful not to believe everything he says. We are only allowed to suspect it, so as not to get ensnared in the sin of having accepted Lashon Harah.

– Chafetz Chaim