



MACHSHAVOT

Parashat Bo

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How Can This Be Happening?

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This week I watched a harrowing report from the BBC about the situation in the Royal London Hospital.

However, one line made me angry.

The BBC reporter said to the nurse about the increase in cases and deaths 'That is what the pandemic has done, it's no one's fault'.

Is that true? Is really no one at fault?

We have been told to stay at home, to avoid crowds, to make sure we do not socialise in order to curb the spread. Yet we know that across our community and across the Jewish world there are still weddings, packed shuls, open schools etc.

Just today I have been sent the story from the BBC that a 400-person wedding party in Stamford Hill was broken up by police. It is now number one in terms of most read stories!!

How can this be?

The answer is Paroh.

Let me explain.

If we look, there is a subtle change in Paroh's responses to the plagues. For the first five the Torah says:

*And the magicians of Egypt did likewise with their enchantments, and **Paroh's heart was hardened**, nor did he listen to them, as the Lord had said. And Paroh turned and went to his house, nor did he set his heart to this. (Exodus 7:22-23)*

*But when Paroh saw that there was respite, **he hardened his heart**, and listened not to them, as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:11)*

*Then the magicians said to Paroh, "This is the finger of God." And **Paroh's heart was hardened**, and he listened not to them, as the Lord had said. (Exodus 8:15)*

And Paroh hardened his heart at this time also, neither would he let the people go. (Exodus 8:28)

*And Paroh sent, and, behold, there was not one of the cattle of the people of Israel dead. **And the heart of Paroh was hardened**, and he did not let the people go. (Exodus 9:7)*

Yet for the last five plagues – there was a change.

*And **the Lord hardened the heart of Paroh**, and he listened not to them; as the Lord had spoken to Moses. (Exodus 9:12)*

*And the Lord said to Moses, "**Go to Paroh, for I have hardened his heart**, and the heart of his servants, that I might show these my signs before him. (Exodus 10:1)*

***But the Lord hardened Paroh's heart**, so that he would not let the People of Israel go. (Exodus 10:20)*

***But the Lord hardened Paroh's heart**, and he would not let them go. (Exodus 10:27)*

***And I will harden Paroh's heart**, that he shall follow after them. (Exodus 14:4-5)*

How can this be? Surely the basis of life is the idea of freedom of choice. According to the Rambam, life without such freedom would be meaningless, a veritable theological nightmare. How can Hashem harden Paroh's heart? Where is the free will?

The Rambam's answer is both brilliant and chilling and sheds light on the current shocking scenes within parts of our religious community.

To understand the Rambam, we need to understand what it means to have free will. As Rav Dessler writes in *Michtav M Eliyahu*, that we don't actually have complete free will. For example, most balanced people do not have the free will to murder someone in cold blood – that is outside our area where our free will is operating.

As Rav Dessler explains:

When two armies are locked in battle, fighting takes place only at the battlefield. Territory behind the lines of one army is under that army's control and little or no resistance need be expected there. A similar situation prevails in respect of territory behind the lines of the other army. If one side gains a victory at the front and pushes the enemy back, the position of the battlefield will have changed. In fact, therefore, fighting takes place only at one location.

This is called the *Bechira* point – our free will point, and it is not static, based on the actions of each individual either for good or bad – that point shifts, the battle shifts to a new area.

With each good choice successfully carried out, the person rises higher in spiritual level; that is, things that were previously in the line of battle are now in the area controlled by the yetzer hatov and actions done in that area can be undertaken without struggle and without bechira. And so in the other direction. Giving in to the yetzer hara pushes back the frontier of the good, and an act which previously cost one a struggle with one's conscience will now be done without bechira at all.

The Rambam explains that as Paroh continued his intransigence, his denial and his evil actions - he began to change, his *bechira* point began to shift. By the time the sixth plague occurred, it was not that Hashem hardened his heart, but the person who Paroh had become no longer had the idea of letting the Jews go as a choice – it was no longer part of his free will decision. Thus he did not choose it – it just happened.

Over the last few years, there has been a radical change in parts of the Orthodox world. There has been increased ghettoization, increased rejection of the modern world both from the leadership and the community.

The *behira* point has shifted where things that were unthinkable in a Torah community have now come to pass. Actions have consequences and shockingly they are now endangering lives – one of the most important ideas within Torah – *pikauch nefesh*.

A few years ago Rav Aharon Lichtenstein zt"l saw the changing situation and wrote a powerful essay about the dangers, I don't believe he realised where it would eventually lead. In the essay he contrasted the wonderful Torah world he grew up in, with tremendous Torah giants such as Rav Yitchak Hutner, Rav Moshe Feinstein and Rav Yaacov Kamenetsky as his inspiration compared with parts of the Torah world today.

In that earlier era, there were only a few gedolim, but everyone turned to them. This was in a large part due to the deep attachment that existed between the community and its leaders. The connection between them was natural. It was not infrequent to take a four-year-old child to that scholar so that the child would enjoy his radiant countenance, and this would be deeply inscribed upon his soul. The great talmidei chachamim in that generation were connected both to Torah and to the society in which they lived. Even if they were not experts in psychological texts, or in literature and history, the great Torah leaders of that generation were integrated and deeply rooted in the land in which they had grown, and were not detached whatsoever.

This has not been the case, however, in later generations, when many gedolim have chosen a different path, which is many ways the exact opposite of that which preceded it. This is not mere coincidence, and is rather a reflection of a fundamentally different approach, both in its social and education aspects. Many of the gedolim in our day advocate a distorted educational and social approach, under the framework of which talmidei chachamim build up tall walls around themselves, doors which are bolted shut, in order that heaven forbid nothing which is occurring in the outside world should penetrate, and drip into the walls of the study hall.

The situation has changed, the *behira* point has shifted.

We are reaching a situation where the level of *Chillul Hashem* is greater than I can ever remember. We all know that this is not Orthodox Judaism but some sort of radical divergence by a minority – which must be condemned in the strongest terms.

As Rabbi Lichtenstein continues:

The job of a rabbi is to bring others to the love of Hashem. A rabbi is someone who the wider community reads about in the newspaper, and feels positive about. "What a wonderful person. A person who learnt Torah; see how beautiful his behaviour is, how exquisite his manner is. He is concerned for the weak and the oppressed. He takes to heart the situation of the convert, the orphan and the widow. A rabbi such as this, how can we not love him?" And thus Hashem's name becomes loved because of him.

However, to my great pain and sorrow, sometimes the opposite is the case. The actions and statements of talmidei chachamim are publicised, and not only do they not add to the love of Hashem, but rather, heaven forbid, they lead to the hatred of Torah, and to utter desecration and degradation of Hashem.

So much of our wonderful community is involved in acts of *Chesed*, making sure they are keeping safe and acting as a *Kiddush Hashem*. I have been inspired by the words of many of our outstanding Rabbis as they inspire their *kehillot* during lockdown.

We must, as much as we are able, protest the disgraceful *Chillul Hashem* happening within our community, but as the same time, never forget that the *Torah Ha Kedosha* is not at fault, it puts preservation of life above almost anything and encourages us to treat everyone with respect and kindness.

This Shabbat we read of how we left Egypt to attempt to become a *Mamlechet Kohanim v Goi Kadosh* - a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

We still have a long way to go.



A Sign of Hope

Rav Joel Kenigsberg
Shaliach for Mizrachi UK in Hendon

רייח ימי לך מירצמ צראמ רתאצ מוי תא רוכזת ועמל
"In order that you shall remember the day you went out of Egypt all the days of your life"
(Devarim 16:3)

This week we read about one of the most unique events to take place in all of history. The going out of Egypt was accompanied by miracles the likes of which have never been seen since. The ten plagues, the splitting of the sea and the complete overhaul of the laws of nature – for a time the physically impossible became the norm.

We are commanded to remember these events, not just in the obligation to mention them twice a day in the Shema, but in so many of the mitzvot which make up the Torah. Tefillin, Mezuzah, Shabbat, Kiddush, Matzah, Sukkah – all these and many others are connected in some way to the obligation of "מירצמ תאיציל רכז" – remembering the exodus from Egypt.

The Ramban points out that the memory of this event is so critical not just because of what happened in the past, but because of how we need to live our lives today. Yetziat Mitzrayim came to demonstrate the way Hashem intervenes in the workings of the world. That magnitude of open miracles only took place once, but it created a paradigm of how we should view things always.

וניבר השם תרותב קלח מדאל ניאש, הלכ הרותה דוסי מהש מירתסנה מיסנב הדומ מדא מימסרופמה מילודגה מיסנה נמו דיחיב ניב מיברב ניב, מלוע לש וגהנמו עבט מהב ניא מיסנ מלכש וניקמו ונירדב לכב נימאנש דע

“Through the great and obvious miracles, a person will come to recognize the hidden miracles, which are the foundation of our Torah. A person has no portion in the Torah taught by Moshe Rabbeinu, unless they realise that all our events and happenings are miraculous, and there is no such thing as nature and happenstance for an individual or a community.” (Ramban, Shmot 13:16)

Everything in the world is miraculous, writes the Ramban. The miracles in Egypt were an obvious expression of a truth that is concealed, but constant. At a deep level, the laws of nature to which we are accustomed are no less extraordinary than the miracles which took place at the time of the exodus. Behind both is the hand of Hashem.

Perhaps we can take it one step further. Not only is it the laws of nature, chemistry and physics that are miraculous, but also the laws of history. In our generation we are uniquely privileged to be able to witness this. This coming week we will mark International Holocaust Memorial Day. Just one generation ago our people were the most downtrodden and despised on the planet. The very notion of an independent Jewish state must have seemed impossible. Yet today the tiny state of Israel is a source of pride for Jews the world over. Despite the problems that inevitably exist, no other country has managed to vaccinate so much of its population so quickly. Countries across the globe are turning to the Jewish state for inspiration and to learn how to save lives. Israel is a technological powerhouse – and a spiritual powerhouse too. The very existence of the State has allowed for Torah study on a scale unprecedented in human history. There is no greater Kiddush Hashem in our times.

Centuries ago, Rav Yaakov Emden wrote that the continued existence of the Jewish people is the greatest miracle ever to have occurred, greater even than the splitting of the sea. How much more so is that true today, when we see how the Jewish people has not only survived, but thrived and continues to do so, often in ways beyond belief.

Sometimes we fail to notice it, but everyday we mention Yetziat Mitzrayim to help remind ourselves – the times in which we live are truly miraculous.

Shabbat Shalom!

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