



MACHSHAVOT

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A Plague - Ancient and Modern

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There are certain Divrei Torah that you remember where you were when you heard them.

In this case I was sitting in Blueberry Hill Shul in Monsey, when the Rav of the shul, Rabbi Alfred Cohen gave his Friday night drasha. The dvar Torah stuck with me because I found it so simple, yet so profound in its message and in the ensuing 20+ years since I heard it – it has become more and more relevant.

So what was the dvar Torah?

It was about the second plague:

The Lord said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, stretch forth your hand with your staff over the rivers, over the canals, and over the ponds, and bring up the frogs on the land of Egypt."

And Aaron stretched forth his hand over the waters of Egypt, and the frogs came up and covered the land of Egypt.

Shemot 8:1-2

וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל מֹשֶׁה וְאֶל אָהֳרֹן אֲמֹר שֶׁמֶלֶךְ אֵינִי
תִּרְהַבְיָנָה לְעַד רַגְלֵיךָ מִיַּבַּיְתֵי הַטֶּבַח
לְעַד הַיָּם מִיַּבַּיְתֵי הַיָּם וְיָבִיאוּ
מִיִּרְצֵם צְרָאֵל עִי עִדְרֵפֶצֶת הַיָּם

מִיִּרְצֵם יִמַּיְמֵי לַעֲוֹנוֹתֵיךָ וְיָבִיאוּ
צְרָאֵת סִכָּתוֹ עִדְרֵפֶצֶה לְעֵינֶיךָ
מִיִּרְצֵם

We can see that the command from Hashem was to bring 'Tzefardayim' Frogs – plural. Yet when the Torah actually describes Aaron bringing the frogs, the Torah then describes a 'Tzefardea' singular.

Rashi comments:

Literally, and the frog came up. It was one frog, and they [the Egyptians] hit it, and it split into many swarms of frogs. This is its midrashic interpretation. (Tanchuma, Va'era 14)

Rabbi Cohen looked at us and in his wonderful New York accent he challenged us. The Midrash explains that every time you hit the frog it doubled, so how stupid were the Egyptians, once they hit the frog and it split, so just stop hitting. The only way there could have been swarms of frogs, was if people kept hitting them again and again.

He gave two answers – both of extreme relevance today.

First, the Egyptians could have said ‘Ok, that one split and didn’t die when I hit it, but this one will be different.’ And they just continued, convincing themselves that this time it will be different. Reminds me of the saying ‘The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.’

Unfortunately, this is prevalent in so many areas of our life, whether with ourselves fighting various challenges or in the educational sphere where certain strategies have been shown not to be successful but we just carry on with them, expecting that this time it will work.

True growth in an area means we have to be honest with ourselves and with others and look closely at what changes we must make in our lives, our families and our institutions. We don’t want to get to the stage of what Ed Balls famously said ‘We have come to the edge of the abyss and now it is time for a bold step forward.’

The other answer Rabbi Cohen gave, focused on the mental state of the Egyptians. They were angry, very angry with the appearance of the frogs and even though they knew that their actions were very damaging, their anger got in the way.

We have sadly seen over the last few years, what happens when political decisions are not made calmly with rational thought but with anger and hate on both sides. It is worrying when those emotions are allowed to govern our decisions.

Anger is never a good thing.

As Rabbi Sacks, ZT”L writes:

The sages were outspoken in their critique of anger. They would thoroughly have approved of the modern concept of anger management. They did not like anger at all, and reserved some of their sharpest language to describe it.

“The life of those who can’t control their anger is not a life,” they said (Pesachim 113b). Resh Lakish said, “When a person becomes angry, if he is a sage his wisdom departs from him; if he is a prophet his prophecy departs from him” (Pesachim 66b). Maimonides said that when someone becomes angry it is as if he has become an idolater (Hilkhos Deot 2: 3).

What is dangerous about anger is that it causes us to lose control. It activates the most primitive part of the human brain that bypasses the neural circuitry we use when we reflect and choose on rational grounds. While in its grip we lose the ability to step back and judge the possible consequences of our actions. The result is that in a moment of irascibility we can do or say things we may regret for the rest of our lives.

For that reason, rules Maimonides (Hilkhos Deot 2: 3), there is no “middle way” when it comes to anger. Instead we must avoid it under any circumstance. We must go to the opposite extreme. Even when anger is justified, we must avoid it. There may be times when it is necessary to look as if we are angry. That is what Moses did when he saw the Israelites worshipping the Golden Calf, and broke the tablets of stone. Yet even then, says Maimonides, inwardly you should be calm.

Maybe now you can see why the dvar Torah stuck with me. It deals with two of the most damaging characteristics which stunt growth and can cripple society – denial and anger.

In the Egyptian’s case it led to the spread of a plague.

In our case, not only could it and has it lead to the spread, it could also harm the cure.

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A Sign of Hope

Channah Hambling
Participant of the Mizrachi UK Fellowship Programme

"But I will harden Pharaoh's heart, that I may multiply My signs (אֵימֹתַי) and marvels (מוֹפְתֹתַי) in the land of Egypt." (Shemot 7:3)

The Eskimos have many words for snow. The British have many words for rain. To an outsider this may seem repetitive, but people in Britain know that there is a difference between when it's raining or when it's spitting outside. In this *passuk*, we have two words which seem repetitive, but they mean different things.

The Malbim, a nineteenth century commentator on Tanach, points out that the words **אֵימֹתַי** and **מוֹפְתֹתַי** describe an apparently unnatural occurrence. In fact, they can both describe the same occurrence, but how one views such an event determines which word you would use to describe it. If you see an event as a sign from Hashem, you would call it an **אֵימֹתַי**, a sign. If you view it has a random occurrence than the term you would use is a **מוֹפְתֹתַי**, a marvel.

The plagues were an unnatural phenomenon. When Pharaoh looked at these events, all he saw was an unnatural, random sequence of events. However, the Bnei Yisrael saw something different. They believed in Hashem and knew that He runs the world through nature. Therefore, when they saw something unnatural occurring, they knew that it was Hashem Who had chosen to change the course of nature. As such, they realised that Hashem must have been trying to tell them something: He was trying to tell them that even though things seemed desperate for them in Egypt, their time there would soon be over. Indeed, He would literally move heaven and earth to save them.

The same thing can be true for the Covid-19 vaccine. We can either view it as a **מוֹפְתֹתַי**, something amazing but not connected to a Higher Power, or we can view it as an **אֵימֹתַי**, a sign from Hashem that things will get better. I know which one I would choose...

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