

Parsha Beshalach

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1. Our Ability to Affect Time

At the beginning of the Book of Bereshis Rashi asks why does the Torah begin with the history of creation and not with the first mitzvah that was given to the Jewish people, which is the sanctification of the new moon? This mitzvah was given to the Jewish people before they left Egypt.

The mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon enables the Jewish people to determine time because it is through the ruling of the Sanhedrin (the High Court of Israel) that the beginning of the month is established (based on the testimony of two witnesses observing the new moon.) The ramifications of being able to determine time in this manner are far reaching. Through the sanctification of the new moon the Sanhedrin determines the beginning of the month thus establishing each festival in its time. Although each festival such as Rosh Hashana, Yom Kippur, and Sukkos, have an innate spiritual value and are commanded by G-d, the days of their observance are established by the Sanhedrin when it pronounces the beginning of each month. In fact one of the blessing that we recite in the Amidah about the festivals states that Hashem has sanctified the Jewish people who in turn sanctify time. Why was this Mitzvah the first one given to us as a Jewish People?

On a practical level, the sanctification of time was necessary to establish the day on which the Pascal Offering was to be brought. G-d commanded the Jews to bring the Korban Pesach on the 14th of Nissan; however, the beginning of Nissan had to be established by the Jews to determine when the fourteenth would be. Why did the Jewish people need to sanctify the time? G-d could have designated the beginning of Nissan Himself. As the Gemara states, if the witnesses did not testify before the Sanhedrin then Heaven sanctified it. If that is the case, why was the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon the first commandment given to the Jewish people? Hashem could have sanctified the month, yet He chose to have the Sanhedrin do it – why?

Time is a reality of existence. We exist within time and it dictates our existence - hopefully we can utilize that time effectively. Time is constantly progressing forward with or without our involvement. Physical beings are completely bound by time, which exists in a dimension other than the physical world. How does a mere mortal affect and control time? How could physical beings determine the beginning of the month or when Pesach starts or even when the Day of Judgment (Rosh Ha Shanna) will be? If a child is born on the first of Nissan and it is determined by the Sanhedrin that it is a leap year then that child will enter into adulthood and mitzvos, a month later. We determine the reality of time. How is this possible?

Hashem gave the Jewish people the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon to indicate the Jews are not bound by existence. The Jewish people may live within existence but are not limited by the physical world and time. G-d gave the Jew the ability to determine time and therefore determine existence. The Jew can affect existence and does not need to be controlled by existence.

When the Jews left Egypt, they were coming from the lowest possible spiritual level. The Jews viewed themselves no differently than the Egyptians – both were pagans. The Jews knew they had a different ancestry than the Egyptians, but for all practical purposes they believed that there was no difference between themselves and the Egyptians. G-d wanted the Jewish people to understand that they are not at all like the Egyptians or any other people. G-d demonstrated that all existence was created for the sake of the Jewish people and that they transcend physical existence.

Therefore the first mitzvah that Hashem gave the Jews was the sanctification of the New Moon.

If the Jewish people had understood that their essence was fundamentally different than the Egyptians, they would have understood that the purpose of their existence was on another plane. By giving the Jews the ability to sanctify time, G-d demonstrated that the Jew has no commonality with the Egyptian. We determine existence, while the Egyptian was bound and controlled by existence.

2. How to Have a Relationship with G-d.

Before the Jews left Egypt, Hashem gave them the two positive commandments: the Pascal Lamb (the *Korban Pesach* – which was the slaughtering and eating of a lamb or goat) and Circumcision. It is stated in Yechezkel (Prophets) that before the Jews were redeemed from Egypt they were in a “naked” state. This is explained by the Gemara to mean that the Jews were not physically naked but rather they were devoid of mitzvos and thus lacking merit for redemption. Therefore, in order for the Jews to merit redemption, they needed to be given the opportunity to perform mitzvos (Korban Pesach and Circumcision.)

It seems that it was only through fulfillment of these two mitzvos that the Jews merited redemption. Yet we see from Chazal that the Jews had other merits that led to their redemption. The Midrash tells us that one of the reasons the Jews merited to be redeemed from Egypt was that we did not change our Jewish names, our Hebrew language, or our Jewish mode of dress. Despite the bondage and the pagan influences of Egyptian culture, the Jews maintained their Jewish identities. Also, Ten months prior to the Exodus, Moshe informed the Jews that they were going to borrow the valuables of the Egyptians. Yet, the Jews kept this secret for ten months and did not reveal it to anyone. The Chazal tell us because the Jews were able to keep this secret they merited redemption. Another reason given by the Chazal for the Jewish redemption is because of the unswerving faith of righteous women who believed that ultimately Hashem would redeem them.

It seems that there were many reasons given by Chazal why the Jews merited redemption from Egypt. If this is the case then why is it stated in Yechezkel that before we were redeemed we were devoid of merit?

According to Rashi’s interpretation of the verse in Yechezkel, it was not that Jews were lacking in merit at the time of redemption, but rather they did not have any mitzvos to perform. If gaining merit through the performing of mitzvos was not the issue then what purpose did the mitzvos serve?

G-d said that He alone took the Jews out of Egypt; it was not through an angel or other agent. The question is then – in what context must one need to be in order to merit a relationship directly G-d? The only context that one can have such a relationship is through a context of mitzvos. If one is not within the context of mitzvos then regardless of one’s merits there can be no relationship with Hashem. From this we can understand that it was not that the Jews were lacking in merit, but rather they needed the mitzvos to establish the context within which a relationship with Hashem could be possible. As we cited earlier, the Jews had several merits, however, the Jews needed to cleave to Hashem in order to be taken out of Egypt by Him. Thus they were given the two mitzvos of Korban Pesach and Circumcision.

If one is fortunate, through the merit of his forbearers, to experience an awakening of clarity, such as a Baal Teshuvah (a person recommitting himself to Mitzvos), then the question is what does one do with that clarity? He must involve himself in the performance of mitzvos.

Similarly, the Gemara tells us that the Divine Presence only rests upon those with *simcha* (joy). The joy which is referred to by the Gemara is not light-headedness or joking but rather the joy and excitement which results from performing mitzvos. It is only by performing mitzvos with a sense of privilege and joy that we can have a relationship with G-d.

3. The Importance of not Missing Opportunity

This week's parsha begins, "**(Vayehi) It happened when Pharaoh sent the people that G-d did not lead them...**" The Gemara in *Megillah* tells us that whenever a parsha begins with the word *Vayehi* that it is an indication of difficult events or circumstances because "**Vayehi is an expression of pain.**" Since the parsha begins by recounting the release of the Jews from Egypt, one would think that was a time of great joy and not pain. If this is the case then why does the Torah use an expression of pain (*Vayehi*)?

The Midrash tells us that when Hashem sent the Jews out of Egypt He said, "**Woe to Me that I needed to send them out! The Jews had only witnessed ten plagues before I had to take them out of Egypt! I wish that I could have visited upon the Egyptians more plagues!**" The Bais HaLevy asks, how does Hashem bemoan the fact that He could not bring about more plagues upon them? The pasuk states, "**And He has mercy on all of His handiwork.**" Why would G-d want to inflict the Egyptians with more plagues? Does G-d act cruelly to His creation? In addition, G-d could have sent the Jews out of Egypt at any time and inflicted the Egyptians with more plagues. Why is G-d depicted, by the Midrash, as bemoaning the fact that He could not bring more plagues upon the Egyptians?

The Chazal tell us that the Jews in Egypt had fallen to the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity, which is the lowest point before spiritual extinction. If they had gone beyond this point they would not have been able to be redeemed. The Jews **needed** to be redeemed at that particular moment, when they were taken out of Egypt. Hashem was bemoaning the fact that He could not bring more plagues upon the Egyptians because the Jews could not have remained any longer in Egypt because they had spiritually deteriorated. If the Jews could have remained longer, then G-d would have inflicted more plagues upon the Egyptians. What remains difficult to understand is how do we reconcile this with the edict that G-d is merciful to His creation?

Parshas Va'eira begins, "**And G-d (*Elokim*) spoke to Moshe and said to him 'I am Hashem' ...**" The Ohr Ha'Chaim Ha'Kadosh explains that two names of Hashem are used – *Elokim* which represents the attribute of Justice and *Hashem* which represents the attribute of Mercy indicating that two attributes of G-d were going to be activated simultaneously. With respect to the Egyptians, G-d was going to interact with them through the Attribute of Justice, while at the same time He was going to show the Jews the Attribute of Mercy. Hashem brought the plagues upon the Egyptians because they were deserving of punishment. However, simultaneously the plagues were an act of Mercy towards the Jews who became more spiritually elevated through the witnessing of each plague. The Bais HaLevy has a similar explanation regarding how we are to understand Hashem's desire to inflict more plagues on the Egyptians.

The Bais HaLevy explains that Hashem was bemoaning the release of the Jews at that particular time because had they remained longer in Egypt they would have witnessed more plagues and they would have been completely purged of all pagan influences of the Egyptians. It was because the Jews were not purged from these influences that they committed the sin of the Golden Calf, which was a remnant of their pagan past. If they had seen more of the Hand of G-d through more plagues in Egypt the incident of the Golden Calf would not have occurred.

Therefore the parsha starts with an expression of pain (*Vayehi*) because Hashem would have wanted the Jews to remain longer in Egypt to witness more miracles and thus be purged of all of the Egyptian influences. The more the Jews would have been able to understand and appreciate the power of G-d the stronger they would have been. However, the Jews were not able to stay longer in Egypt because they were at a dangerously low spiritual level. Hashem is bemoaning the fact that He could have presented the Jews with more opportunities to be purged and to grow; however, He was not able to. What can we learn from this?

Often times Hashem presents us with opportunities, which we gloss over or totally ignore. Do we not think that G-d bemoans that missed opportunity? If G-d bemoaned not being able to inflict more plagues on the Egyptians would He not bemoan opportunities that we deliberately ignore?

The Mishnah tells us that the Jews witnessed ten revealed miracles in the Bais Ha'Mikdash (the Temple) each day, yet they did not appreciate their value thus missing opportunities for spiritual growth. As a result of not valuing these miracles, we ultimately lost the Bais Ha'Mikdash and fell to a low spiritual state. Hashem is continuously revealing Himself in existence. The question is do we take notice of the opportunity or do we turn a blind eye?

4. Wisdom of the Heart

The Torah tells us that Moshe was personally involved in locating Yosef's remains and taking them out of Egypt. In *Mishley*, Shlomo Ha'Melech (King Solomon) states, "**A wise heart takes mitzvos.**" The Gemara in Sotah explains that this is referring to Moshe Rabeinu. Moshe was searching for Yosef's remains while the Jews were preoccupied with borrowing the silver and gold vessels from the Egyptians. Although it was a Mitzvah for the Jews to borrow the valuables from the Egyptians as G-d commanded them, Moshe sought Yosef's remains as a result of his wisdom of heart. Since both Moshe and the Jewish people were engaged in the performance of Mitzvos why is only Moshe identified as having wisdom of heart?

The Gemara tells us that the Egyptians knew that the Jewish people would not be able to leave Egypt without Yosef's remains. (Yosef had adjured his brothers to adjure their children to take his remains from Egypt at the time of the Exodus). In order to prevent the Jews from removing these remains, the Egyptians placed Yosef's body in a lead tomb and sunk it to the bottom of the Nile. After Moshe's extensive search, he came upon Serach Bas Asher (who was alive at the time of Yosef's death), who knew the location of Yosef's remains. Moshe understood that without locating these remains the Jews would not be able to leave Egypt regardless of all the prior miraculous events surrounding their redemption. It was because of Moshe's initiative regarding this that he is identified as a person who has a "wise heart who takes mitzvos." But we see that the Jews were also engaged in a Mitzvah – why are they not also considered as having "a wise heart"? Was their Mitzvah any less than Moshe's?

In order to answer this we must first understand what is wisdom. The Mishna in *Perkei Avos* states that a wise man is one who sees the consequences of his actions. This wisdom may come from seeing the result of actions as well as inactions depending on the situation. However "seeing" is more than merely conceptualizing and understanding the results of one's actions, but rather it is internalizing the consequences and seeing them as if they were a reality. One who only conceptualizes the results of his actions can only relate to the results as something abstract and thus allowing conflict of interest to interfere. For example, if one sees fire and knows that it will burn his hand, he will not act irresponsibly; however, if he only conceptually believes that the fire will burn him then it is possible that under certain circumstances he will act irresponsibly as a result of a conflict of interest.

Although the Jews were engaged in a Mitzvah, they did not have the same level of clarity as Moshe. They were preoccupied with borrowing the valuables from the Egyptians believing that it was a certainty that they were leaving Egypt. Having witnessed all the plagues and miracles, the Jews believed without a doubt that redemption was at hand. What about the fact that they were not able to leave Egypt without the remains of Yosef? This did not enter into their minds because they believed that in some way someone else would resolve this issue.

However, Moshe saw the problem of not meeting the responsibility to Yosef as a reality. He knew that this issue needed to be attended to. Moshe had this level of clarity because he had a wise heart and knew that if Yosef's remains were not retrieved the Jews were not going to be able to leave Egypt regardless of that had taken place up until that point. Since the rest of the Jews did not "see" the problem, they were able to evade resolving it. The need to retrieve Yosef's remains was purely a conceptual and theoretical requirement to leave Egypt.

Hashem rewarded Moshe's actions "measure for measure". Just as Moshe had a wise heart and tended to Yosef's burial needs, so too did Hashem tend to Moshe's burial needs (only Hashem knows the burial location of Moshe).

The Gemara in *Yomah* tells us that the Holy Ark in the Mishkan (the *Aron*) was cast in gold both on from the inside and the outside just as a Torah Sage's external presence is a reflection of his internal purity. The Torah Sage is not merely a repository of Torah knowledge but rather he internalizes to the core of his being and lives every moment through the application of Torah wisdom. His Torah knowledge is neither conceptual nor abstract but rather it is a reality causing him to have a wise heart.

5. *What is our Potential?*

The Torah states, **“And the Children of Israel were armed (*chamushim*) when they went up from Egypt.”** Rashi cites two interpretations of *chamushim*; either it means that the Jews left Egypt armed with weapons and provisions for the desert or *chamushim* means that only one fifth of the Jews left Egypt. The Chazal tell us that four fifths of the Jews died in Egypt during the plague of darkness. Why is it important for us to know that only one fifth of Klal Yisroel left Egypt? Secondly why did four fifths perish during the days of darkness?

In parshas Bo, Rashi explains that the reason why four fifths of the Jews died during the plague of darkness was because they did not want to leave Egypt. Why did they not want to leave the land of their bondage? Did they not recognize G-d's ability? It is indicated from the Torah that all the Jews did in fact recognize G-d, because the Torah states that the only reason why Pharaoh did not recognize G-d was because Hashem hardened his heart. If Pharaoh would have been able to recognize Hashem then it is certain that all the Jews recognized Him. The revealed miracles in Egypt were so overwhelming that no one could deny G-d's presence. Understanding this, why did four fifths of the Jews not want to leave Egypt?

We quote a verse in the Musaf Service of Rosh Hashanah (*Zichronos* (Remembrances)) to remind Hashem of our relationship with Him. Hashem says, “I will always remember the kindness of your youth that you followed Me into an unplanted desert.” This verse seems to be difficult. Why would G-d consider our following Him into the desert a “kindness” since we had already witnessed ten revealed miracles that were unprecedented in the history of the world? Evidently, despite all that had transpired in Egypt it was difficult for the Jews to leave. The question is why?

When our Patriarch Avraham chose to give his life by going into the fire rather than bowing to the idol, he believed that he was going to sanctify the Name of Hashem. The fact that he survived unharmed was due to a miracle of which he had no prior knowledge. If on the other hand Hashem would have told him to go into the fire and that he would emerge unharmed, it would have been much more difficult to accept because it would have been contrary to reality. Avraham's sacrifice did not require any negation of his understanding of reality because he did not expect to survive the fire.

Hashem told the Jewish people that they were leaving Egypt to go into an unplanted desert that they would survive despite the physical situation. How does one relate to this within the context of reality? In order to accept Hashem's promise and believe that they would survive the desert, the Jews needed to completely negate their own perception of reality and accept what G-d deems to be reality. This level of self-negation requires a person to be at an extraordinary level. The four fifths of Klal Yisroel who did not want to leave Egypt were not capable of this level of negation.

The one fifth that left Egypt were extraordinary individuals who were able to set aside their own perception of reality and understanding and negate themselves to do the Will of Hashem. It is to these people that Hashem says that He will always remember the “kindness of your youth that you followed me into an unplanted desert.”

Given the great spiritual level and quality of the Jews who left Egypt, we can understand how they were able to accept the Torah (fifty days later) with the declaration of “We will do and we will listen”, accepting the Will of G-d without even knowing the extent of the obligation. The Jews who stood at Sinai to receive the Torah had achieved total the level of total negation of themselves thus causing that Hashem's Reality was their reality. This level of negation was at such a level that

the angels in heaven were astounded that the Jews were able to rise to it.

We are descendants of this special group of Jews that left Egypt. We are part of their spiritual genealogy. With this capability, it is clear that we have the potential to go beyond our own physical reality and conform to the Will of Hashem.

6. How to Avoid Confusion

The Torah tells us that after the Jews fled Egypt, Hashem instructed Moshe to tell them to travel back towards the oncoming Egyptians and camp before *Baal-zefon*, the Lord of the North which was one of the deities of Egypt. **Hashem spoke to Moshe saying, “ Speak to the Children of Israel and let them turn back and encamp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, before Baal-zefon; you shall encamp opposite it, by the sea. Pharaoh will say about the Children of Israel, ‘They are confined in the land, the Wilderness locked them in.’”**

Hashem wanted the Jews to act in this manner, as Rashi explains, so as to confuse Pharaoh and mislead him into believing that although all the idols and deities of Egypt were destroyed during the tenth plague, *Baal-zefon* remained intact and was restricting the Jews. Pharaoh would be misled and conclude without any doubt that Hashem was unable to destroy *Baal-zefon*. Rashi cites a verse from *Job*, **“He (Hashem) misleads the nations in order to destroy them.”**

How could Pharaoh believe that Hashem was not able to destroy the *Baal-zefon*? He had witnessed the revealed miracles and the plagues that came upon Egypt, which indicated that Hashem was the Omnipotent Being. It was clear that there was nothing beyond Hashem’s capabilities. Pharaoh should have believed that since Hashem was the Omnipotent Being the only reason why *Baal-zefon* was left standing was only to confuse and bait him. Nevertheless when Pharaoh saw the Jews were seemingly trapped before the *Baal-zefon* he believed that Hashem was not able to destroy this deity. Given that Pharaoh had witnessed the Hand of Hashem in Egypt, how could he be so misled?

There are endless variables, which allow one to see reality with clarity. It is difficult for one to have this level of clarity through one’s own understanding and perception. Unless one is willing to accept Hashem in the most absolute terms, there will always be room for questions. And these questions could undermine the very foundation of one’s belief in Hashem, G-d forbid.

The Torah tells us that Hashem referred to Himself as “*Elokei Yitzchak*” during the lifetime of Yitzchak. Rashi cites the Chazal that explains that Hashem identifies Himself with an individual in this manner only after that person has passed away because up until the moment of death a person has the potential to reject Hashem and completely change their belief in G-d. Hashem did not identify himself in this manner with our Patriarchs Avraham and Yaakov while they were alive despite the fact they were like living angels in constant communication with G-d. Evidently it must always be possible for a person to falter in their belief up until the last moment of their existence.

Every day we pray that Hashem should not test us, even though overcoming difficult tests is considered a great achievement. The answer is, regardless of the strength of our beliefs or our clarity of mind, there is always a possibility that we may falter. There are many questions that we are not able to answer. If we are not able to go beyond those questions our faith will be in jeopardy.

We can now understand the verse in *Job* that states that Hashem misleads the nations of the world to destroy them. Hashem can simply put a person in a different situation or present a question that cannot be resolved. If the question gnaws at the person and festers within, it can undermine their faith.

The Gemara in *Avoda Zara* tells us that a person had dreamt that an angel had told him that if he sacrificed his son the drought that was plaguing his community would come to an end. He

sacrificed his son and it began to rain. The Gemara explains Hashem caused this situation in order to test the faith of the people – were they going to believe that the deity caused the rain or was Hashem in control of the world?

If we believe and trust Hashem in the most absolute sense the most difficult question is not a question. Thus guaranteeing that we can weather any storm.