

PARSHAS BO

תשע"ט

Parshas Bo has four distinct sections. The beginning of the parsha is the description of the final makkos building up to makkas bechoros. The Rambam writes that the story of Moshe confronting Pharaoh is a historical fact and simultaneously, it illustrates the struggles all human beings have between their yetzer horo and yetzer tov.

Pharaoh sees everything in Egypt has crumbled. All ancient societies built their economy on agriculture and animal power to produce wealth. Makkas borod and arbeh destroyed all the crops. In borod, all the animals were killed (besides those who feared Hashem and hid their animals inside shelters). So the economy, the food supply, has totally collapsed.

Pharaoh says he is letting the Jews go, but be careful—there are evil powers of the midbor coming to oppose you. Pharaoh doesn't really have a choice but to capitulate. But when people are desperate to hold on to their sense of control, they use any sliver of a possibility to deny the uncomfortable facts.

For instance, when Moshe predicts makkas bechoros to Pharaoh and his court, he is careful to make an imprecise prediction. "At around midnight." Rashi explains that if the prediction would be precise, and the timekeeping methods of the Egyptians would be a little bit off, they would dismiss the makka as a coincidence and Moshe as a fraud! This is astounding. Rashi is teaching us a deep lesson in human psychology. People who are desperate to avoid changing how they look at the world will use anything to preserve their old way of life. Even though nine makkos have been predicted and came to pass exactly how Moshe said it would, it doesn't matter. If all the bechoros drop dead—a second before or after Moshe said they would—they now have an excuse to block out the truth and carry on life as usual. It could be the flimsiest of pretexts. It doesn't matter. The reality is too uncomfortable and nothing will budge them to make them change.

The most amazing example of this was the fact that on the night of makkas bechoros, Pharaoh goes to bed. He has been going to bed every night the entire year of the makkos! Just imagine: Moshe has not been wrong for nine makkos—the entire Egyptian infrastructure is in ruins. Moshe now warns Pharaoh that his own son will die. But it doesn't matter. Pharaoh wants to go through life making believe there is nothing to worry about. Nothing will disturb his fantasy.

Then there is a total explosion in Egypt—everyone screaming—and now he wakes up and leaves his bed in the middle of the night. This is the human condition.

The next part of the parsha is the korban Pesach. Where does this korban fit into the scheme of yetzias mitzraim?

Hashem has been giving Klal Yisroel a powerful education for an entire year about the reality of the world. There is no other power in the world. All the avodo zoros are false. There is only Hashem's power which causes everything to exist and causes everything to happen. He showed it with the Nile and with the sun. But these are brand new concepts. For generations, Klal Yisroel had been completely integrated into Egyptian culture and are virtually indistinguishable from the Egyptians. Before they leave Egypt, they have to demonstrate that they are different, that they are worthy of leaving.

Before Yaakov went down to Egypt, he was very excited to see Yosef before he dies. But then Yaakov comes to Be'er Shevah. This place is like a hard line between civilization and total midbor all the way to

Egypt. He gets nervous about how the golus would progress over the years—perhaps we will never come back? Maybe this is a one-way trip?

Hashem appears to Yaakov and reassures him: I will go down with you and guarantee that they will return. But there are no free lunches in this world. Klal Yisroel have to deserve redemption. So Hashem has to give Klal Yisroel a crash-course in the fundamentals of Yiddishkeit for an entire year in the hope that they can extricate themselves from the influence they've been under for so long. But despite all this, for 80% of Klal Yisroel, it doesn't stick. They think that Egypt is their permanent home and somehow justify everything going on around them. It was too hard to go back to being the children of the ovos and they will have to die in makkas choshech. For the rest, those who were ready to leave, it also wasn't so simple. They have to bring a korban pesach and perform bris miloh. These were preconditions for being worthy of geuloh.

Miloh is one of the few mitzvos which are a bris between Hashem and Klal Yisroel. Like Shabbos, it is what makes Klal Yisroel unique and without it, we lose our core identity as Hashem's special people. On Shabbos, we testify that Hashem created the world and we pull back from creative activity on Shabbos to show that this world is not ours. If we violate Shabbos, we are treated like a non-Jew.

In Kiddush we say the posuk "asher boroh Elokim la'asos." What does la'asos mean? It means the world is really incomplete and needs to be made by us. Hashem created us with an orloh for us to remove. Turnus Rufus asked Rabbi Akiva—If Hashem despises the orloh, why did He create us with one? If He hates poverty, why did He create people who are poor?

Rabbi Akiva responded that these are good questions. But whose actions are better? Hashem's or Man's? Come back to me tomorrow with a handful of wheat kernels. Rabbi Akiva prepared for the meeting with a cake his wife made. He first told Turnus Rufus to eat the cake and then eat the kernels. He enjoyed the cake and then vomited from ingesting the kernels.

Rabbi Akiva shows him that man's actions are better. Hashem created the world in its raw, unfinished state. Hashem wants us to complete it. Even Odom requires completion and perfection and the first step is through bris miloh. We have to make ourselves better people out of the raw material Hashem created. We can mold and form ourselves into someone who Hashem wants us to become. We don't do "self-discovery". Don't accept yourself just the way you are. Push yourself to become more than who you started out to be.

This is bris miloh. Hashem created an imperfect world and expects us to finish the job. Sometimes it isn't easy to raise ourselves up to levels that we aren't used to being on. Hashem tells the novi that we survived Egypt through our blood. Nothing of any value happens in this world without sacrifice and pain of growth and elevation.

All this was a precondition to becoming Jewish. A bris miloh means we testify with our very bodies that we are Hashem's representatives in the world—different from all other nationalities.

Chazal tell us how Dovid Hamelech labeled a mizmor of Tehillim. He was in a bath house and was mortified that he didn't have any mitzvos on him—no tallis, no tefillin—to remind him that he is a Jew who serves Hashem. Then he was put at ease when he realized he still had

bris miloh—an indelible sign that he is a servant of Hashem which can never be removed from him—on his very flesh.

Some people can subject everything they have to Hashem besides their very selves. Bris Miloh is who we are. This Mizmor doesn't talk about miloh at all! It talks about loshon horo. Why? Because once we subject our very selves, we realize that even our speech and our mannerisms are subject to Hashem's command.

Hashem told us to put the blood of the korban on the doorposts. Why was this necessary? Hashem needs some blood to figure out which house is Jewish and which isn't?

The answer is that this was a part of our demonstration that we are worthy of being redeemed. We had to take the avodo zoro of the Mitzrim in public, make it a sacrifice and put it on display on the doorpost for everyone to see. We had to make a total rejection of our previous identity. We are not subject to our human masters, we don't fear their disapproval. We only fear Hashem.

This was the zechus that made us worthy of geuloh. We became spiritually mature and developed. But we had to take that maturity and put it into practice—make a public demonstration of our devotion to avodas Hashem. These are the two mitzvos asei which are chayav koreis. Without them, we are lacking the conviction that we are Jews whose very identity is that we are avdei Hashem.

In every generation, there are avodo zoros without number. We need to take the prevalent avodo zoro and culture and reject it publically. We don't care if the world goes crazy and threatens to harm us.

When Klal Yisroel leave, the eirev rav leave with them. These are a very dangerous group of people. They were the source of Klal Yisroel's

downfall throughout their journey in the midbor and throughout the generations.

What is so dangerous about them? They were so taken by Klal Yisroel's meteoric rise to greatness that they wanted to follow them. They saw all the wealth and majesty of Klal Yisroel when they left Egypt that they wanted to be a part of it too and jump on the bandwagon. But Klal Yisroel had to earn it first with painful lessons and mitzvos involving their own blood. The eirev rav wanted to enjoy all the benefits without making any sacrifices. But then, when things get hard, they were the first ones to complain.

Of course Torah and Mitzvos are the most uplifting and inspiring things in the world. But it takes effort and struggle of climbing a mountain, in slow, careful steps. There is no instant ruchniyus where you press a button and you gain sheleimus. You can't expect real growth to come easy.

My rebbe once pointed out that we say in the beginning of the haggodoh—hoh lachmoh anyoh—a poor man's bread. But at the end of the haggodoh, the matzoh becomes a symbol of freedom and geuloh. Once you go through a yetzias Mitzrayim, then the same matzoh you ate as a slave becomes transformed into a food of freedom.

We need to review yetzias Mitzrayim in the many mitzvos we repeat daily, because the lessons are so vital and so fundamental. The idea of subjecting ourselves entirely to Hashem without holding back, to denounce the avodo zoros being worshiped around us, to go through pain and hardship in order to achieve something worthwhile—in order to raise our level and be worthy of geuloh. That is what it means to be Jewish.