

PARSHAS BESHALACH

תשפ"א

Klal Yisroel are leaving Egypt.

The Torah is very explicit that the reason that Klal Yisroel spent 40 years in the desert was because of the sin of the spies. But the Mechiltoch asks a strange question: Why couldn't Klal Yisroel go straight into Eretz Yisroel after leaving Egypt? Why was it necessary to spend 40 years in the midbor? It answers that if they would go straight into Eretz Yisroel, each Jew would immediately start to cultivate his field and his vineyard. There wouldn't be sufficient time to absorb the Torah before they became distracted with the burdens of making a livelihood. So Hashem kept them in the desert for 40 years, until the Torah was absorbed into their being. Then they went to Eretz Yisroel and started to make a living with a deep connection to Torah which would sustain them. We shall return to this idea.

Klal Yisroel came to Yam Suf. Kriyas Yam Suf was an amazing event. To appreciate it adequately you need to understand the geography of the region.

In Egypt there is the Nile with ends at the Nile Delta. Ramses is at the eastern corner of the Nile Delta. All of Klal Yisroel miraculously assembled there overnight and went due south. They travelled in the direction of the western end of the Sinai Peninsula, which is the eastern coast of the Gulf of Suez. Then they went north over the top of the Gulf of Suez and then went down to the western side of the Gulf of Suez. This is the opposite direction to Eretz Yisroel!

On the western coast of the Gulf of Suez, Klal Yisroel encamped at Pi haChiros near Migdol, in front of the idol of Baal Tzefone. How did this idol remain intact? As we know, at the night of makkas bechoros, all the idols were destroyed. The metal ones melted, the wooden ones rotted. They all dissolved into dust. The only idol that survived was Baal Tzefone. It was the idol of the god of money – it seems that the last god which people cling to after all else fails them, is the god of money.

What is Migdol? It was a military camp at the south-eastern border of Egypt – by Pi haChiros. What is it doing so far away from Egypt proper, and what is Baal Tzefone doing there? The answer is that this is where all the treasure houses of Yosef's time were kept and guarded.

Yosef amassed an enormous amount of wealth by selling grain to the population during the years of famine. They stored these treasures away from the population centers to be guarded by the military and the god of money. And this is exactly where Klal Yisroel were headed!

Pharaoh is made aware of this threat on his money and came racing down to stop them. The Midrash says Klal Yisroel didn't cross from one side of the Gulf of Suez to the other. They entered in and came out at the same western side.

Pharaoh had his own army coming from Egypt and the military stationed at Migdol. They surrounded Klal Yisroel but eventually drowned in Yam Suf – leaving all the treasures of Yosef right there unprotected. This is the real bizas hayam – not just the ornaments on the horses and chariots of Pharaoh. All these treasures from Yosef were now theirs for the taking.

There is a deep lesson here. We see that the power behind Egypt which allowed them to dominate the entire ancient world at the time, really came from Yosef's treasure houses. There is no way that Pharaoh forgot this! So when the posuk in the beginning of Shemos says that a new king arose who did not know Yosef, it is clearly telling us

about Pharaoh's stunning lack of gratitude to Yosef. Egypt may have been technologically advanced before Yosef, but Yosef gave them tremendous wealth. But Pharaoh ignored it.

The Torah puts tremendous emphasis on the quality of hakoras hatov – gratitude. Since Pharaoh did not acknowledge Yosef's great contribution to Egypt, he didn't deserve to keep this wealth and it was eventually taken away from him. If you do not have the trait of hakoras hatov – gratitude, then what you have will be taken away.

Klal Yisroel went through Yam Suf and said "zeh Keli ve'anvehu". The night of makkas bechoros was a time of unbelievable Gilui Shechinoh. They had experienced a manifestation of Hashem's presence in a very tangible way. When they crossed Yam Suf, they experienced an even more intense revelation of Hashem's presence. They were raised to an unbelievable level of prophecy where they understand everything in the universe!

From the beginning of the ten makkos all the way to Yam Suf, Klal Yisroel were going up and up – from level to level – in understanding Hashem and His absolute control over the world. But then right afterward, the posuk says Klal Yisroel lacked water at Moroh. It refers to a lack of Torah – even when they reached this incredibly high level of Gilui Shechinoh and nevuoh!

Even after you reach a high level, you need a way to hold onto it. Without limud haTorah for three days, the entire experience of Shechinoh and nevuoh can dissipate and be forgotten. Moshe Rabbeinu instituted on the spot that the community cannot go three days without a public Torah reading and Torah learning.

More than that, Hashem gave them some mitzvos and dinim to involve themselves with. This is while they are travelling and moving to Har Sinai to get the Torah. Why was this necessary? Because Klal Yisroel needed a way to stay connected to Hashem and keep their high level at all times.

But we need to understand: Why is the Torah specifically the primary way to make and maintain our connection to Hashem?

The Nefesh Hachaim of Rav Chaim Volozhin explains that Hashem is so remote and removed from our type of existence. We are not able to relate to Him directly. So He gave us a Torah through which our minds can connect to the mind of Hashem.

At the very end of the parsha we have the war with Amolek – it took place at Refidim. The name Refidim comes from the fact that Klal Yisroel became weak in their connection to Torah. Chazal are telling us that when we are strongly connected to Torah, no enemies can threaten us. We have seen that after Yaakov and his family leave Shechem, take back Dinoh and collect the spoils of the city, Yaakov realized that they are in great danger of attack from the surrounding Canaanim. He went to Beis El and told his family to get rid of all the avodo zoro they accumulated. Once he did this, the fear of Hashem was upon all the surrounding settlements and no-one would dare touch them. Yaakov realized that if Dinoh was violated, it was because of some failing in their spirituality. Once they realized this and corrected it, no one could harm them.

Klal Yisroel were moving up from level to level. Hashem told them that in order to hold on to this high level, they have to be connected to Torah. The minute they got sloppy and the connection gets loosened, Amolek came and attacked.

In response, Moshe sent Yehoshua with an army to fight on the battlefield and Moshe went up on a hill to pray for victory. While Moshe's hands were raised, Klal Yisroel were winning the battle. When his hands went down, Amolek started winning. The Mishnah in Rosh Hashono asks, how did Moshe Rabbeinu's hands influence the tide of the battle? The answer is that when Moshe Rabbeinu's hands were raised, Klal Yisroel's eyes and hearts were turned heavenward and they subordinated themselves to Hashem. They realized that Hashem is fighting the war and we are simply His representatives – so they won. But if they think they are in charge and they are fighting for themselves, they will lose.

What is Amolek? Every generation wages its own war against Amolek. How is Amolek defined? Rav Chaim declared that any nation who takes upon themselves a mission to eradicate the Jewish people is Amolek. It doesn't matter if they are the physical descendants of the original people. We say in the haggodoh every year that in every generation, the non-Jews rise up against us.

Where does this un-ending hatred for Jews come from?

When I was growing up after the Second World War, you couldn't mention Anti-Semitism. It fell out of fashion after the Holocaust. But today, Anti-Semitism is very fashionable – especially in leftist intellectual circles. Just like it was in the intellectual circles in the 1930's.

But where does it come from? There are two factors that work simultaneously.

In next week's parsha we read that we are a mamleches kohanim ve'goy kodosh. We represent Hashem in this world. It is a very threatening philosophy for people who want to keep Hashem and spirituality out of their world. Hitler wrote very clearly that the Jews are a problem because they represent a conscience – the idea that human beings are not animals but spiritual beings. For Hitler and his followers, Jews represent this spiritual ideal and they despise us for it. But at the same time, when the Jews don't live up to this ideal of being a mamleches kohanim and Jews want to imitate and assimilate into non-Jewish culture, this motivates the non-Jews to violently reject us.

When Klal Yisroel came to Egypt, Yaakov and Yosef made them stay separate in Egypt. There was no oppression and slavery. When we

started to assimilate and stopped bris miloh, the admiration turned to hatred and the Egyptians started to despise us and enslave us.

When the great rabbonim of the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century saw a massive drive for Jews to assimilate into European society, they issued a dire warning. They warned that this approach will not remove the hatred of Jews. It doesn't work this way. It will only make things worse. Rav Meir Simcha said that the most assimilated country – Germany – will be the place where the persecutions will start. It is a recurring pattern of Jewish history.

How do we hold on to our separate identity and make sure we do not assimilate? It is through limud haTorah. The only way to retain the unbelievable Gilui Shechinoh of Yam Suf was by getting dinim at Moroh. The moment there was a weakening of our connection to learning, Amolek was ready to attack. How do we beat Amolek? We do it by acknowledging that we aren't in charge. We represent Hashem, Who watches over us.

In every generation, Amolek wages its war against Klal Yisroel and their mission in this world. Today there are all kinds of nations and sectors of western society who want to get rid of Jews. Western society is totally falling apart in the most absurd way. As we have been saying from the beginning, we can only make it through this craziness through connecting to limud haTorah. It is our anchor to a stable reality. We are not living in regular times and it makes a connection to learning even more urgent and vital – we cannot afford to be dragged down from our connection to Hashem and distracted by the craziness around us.

The parsha finishes with the mitzvah to record and remember what Amolek did to us – what happens when we slip in our madreigoh. Amolek preys on the weak members of Jewish society – those who make excuses and rationalizations to avoid learning.

In dangerous times such as these, it makes no difference what continent you are living on, you have to remember that the stability and anchor that keeps us going, is ongoing limud haTorah. No matter what happens, limud HaTorah must and will continue. Everyone learning in yeshiva should feel the tremendous responsibility of continuing to learn on behalf of all of Klal Yisroel which connects us to Hashem and makes us worthy of getting through these times of crisis.