

I said a year ago that the world will never be the same. We see today that as things are still developing, we are not yet done with this virus. Hashem wants to show us He is in charge, so He sent us a new strain of the virus to deal with. The United States is in complete social collapse. Israeli society is divided and dysfunctional. Hashem is shaking up the world and He wants us to pay attention. He is telling us He is not happy with the world, and not happy with us. It doesn't take any great genius to understand that a society that is obsessed with a mad pursuit of pleasure is a society that Hashem will not tolerate.

The midrash explains why the dor hamabul was destroyed but the dor haflogoh was spared. The dor hamabul's corruption was on the deepest levels. The mad pursuit of pleasure and following one's impulses without limits, naturally leads to stealing other people's property. Then afterward, it is justified with some kind of philosophy or flimsy rationalization. Last summer in the United States there was violent looting and vandalism and people were assaulted, while the local law enforcement and government looked the other way. They gave no consequences to this violent, selfish behavior, and the media made all kinds of excuses for it. But theft is theft and murder is murder. Society has fallen apart.

The dor haflogoh on the other hand may have been unified in rebellion against Hashem, but their unity preserved their society. When society falls apart, there is nothing to salvage. The midrash asks, why in Dovid Hamelech's time soldiers fell in battle, while in Achov's time, no soldiers were lost? Achov was an idol worshipper and he was determined to make Klal Yisroel idol worshippers as well – a horrible rosho! But since there was unity in his society, they were spared. In the times of Dovid Hamelech, there was no unity.

When Klal Yisroel are unified, no-one can stand up to us. When there is machlokes, we are deeply vulnerable. To the degree that we are a part of this corrupt, degenerative culture, and we are still a part of this society of mad pursuit of pleasure, we will be condemned to their fate. It is a society with no spiritual goals and because of that, there is no way to hold it together.

Bilaam understood this quite well. He knew Klal Yisroel were blessed and could not be cursed. He described us as a separate different nation. But we have to know ourselves that we are different and live our lives with that attitude. But Bilaam knew that if he can tempt us to intermarry and integrate with the non-Jews through znus and avodo zoro, Klal Yisroel will be vulnerable and won't be protected.

Rav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld noted the fact that Pinchos was ridiculed for having a grandfather who was a priest to avodo zoro and he made sense of it. Zimri made up a rationalization for taking the princess of Midian. He argued that there was only a problem with znus – if it was together with avodo zoro. But, if he would demonstrate that znus did not necessarily entail avodo zoro then there would be no dire consequences for Klal Yisroel. Many members of Klal Yisroel followed his logic. They said that of all the people who succumbed to temptation, Pinchos only killed Zimri – who did not worship baal peor. So the people thought Pinchos was insensitive to the sin of idol worship. It was because of the influence of his maternal grandfather. But they were wrong. Pinchos was making a statement that znus alone is enough to bring the middas hadin to put Klal Yisroel in danger of annihilation.

In the beginning of Parshas Mattos, Hashem tells Moshe to send Klal

Yisroel to war to take revenge on Midian. But there is a problem. In Egypt, Moshe Rabbeinu couldn't strike the Nile to start makkas dam and tz'fardea, nor strike the earth for makkas kinim. Why? Because Moshe was saved by the Nile and by the earth and it would show a lack of gratitude to strike them. But here, Moshe found refuge in Midian for many years when Pharaoh wanted to kill him. How could he be told to make war with them and show a lack of gratitude?

The answer is that even though there is an obligation to show gratitude, it only goes up to a point. When they are out to destroy you – either physically or spiritually, you need to put your feelings of gratitude aside and eliminate the threat.

Moshe tells Klal Yisroel to send a thousand from each tribe, but the phrase is repeated. We learn from this that there were two sets of 12 thousand men selected for service. One set of 12 thousand waged the physical war on the battlefield, and the other set was davening and learning that the soldiers be victorious. Moshe Rabbeinu had to make sure that Klal Yisroel understood that the outcome of the war was not determined by physical strength or military strategy but by spiritual merits provided by the second set of 12 thousand. Pinchos was sent to lead the battle with the aron to announce that it is Hashem who is fighting for them.

And they won. They killed all the chiefs of Midian and they killed Bilaam ben Beor. What was he doing there in Midian? He was there to collect his fee for advising Bolok.

The soldiers captured the women and children. They thought these weren't the ones who were trying to destroy them. But Moshe was very angry. They made a grave mistake. It wasn't the military forces of Midian who were the threat. It was the spiritual threat of arayos which put Klal Yisroel in danger. So they killed all the males and all the women above a certain age.

Those who wanted to corrupt Klal Yisroel with a mad pursuit of pleasure from arayos and avodo zoro must be destroyed. You can show no mercy and no gratitude.

Not only did Klal Yisroel win the war, but they also took a massive amount of spoils. After all the trading among the shevatim, Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain ended up with all the livestock. They looked around and saw that the territory of Ever Hayarden was the most fertile and ideal for raising flocks. So they requested to receive their portion of Eretz Yisroel on this side. Moshe Rabbeinu was upset because they are showing hesitancy to enter Eretz Yisroel and it will weaken the other shevatim's resolve just like the meraglim did. So Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain promised that in return for receiving this land, they would fight on the frontlines with Klal Yisroel to conquer the rest of Eretz Canaan. We will build pens for our flocks and protected cities for our children, they said.

Moshe accepted their offer but quickly corrected them about the order of their agreement. They had their priorities backwards. They ought to first build cities for their children and then pens for their flocks! But this raises the question: Did Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain really think their flocks were more important than their own children? If you would phrase the question in such stark terms, no normal parent would say so openly that their money is more important. But the reality is that our actions betray our true priorities. You can say you are doing everything for your children, but you are just using this line as an excuse. You are really doing it for yourself.

This is only half the problem.

We see Moshe Rabbeinu also gives this territory to half of Shevet Menashe. What was the purpose of this? The Netziv explains that Shevet Menashe was a shevet who devoted their lives to limud haTorah. Moshe wanted Shevet Menashe to balance their infatuation with their new-found wealth. Being around people who were sitting and learning instead of pursuing material wealth will teach them that there is a spiritual side of life.

This is an interesting follow-up to this incident – the mitzvah of establishing orei miklot for accidental murderers to find refuge. It is interesting to note that out of six total orei miklot, three were on one side of the Yarden servicing the 9 ½ shevatim, and another 3 ½ were in Ever Hayarden. Chazal say that there are more murderers in Ever HaYarden. Is there something about the land of Ever Hayarden which causes people to murder accidentally, more than anywhere else and requires the same number of orei miklot for a much smaller population?

The answer is that once these two shevatim got their hands on incredible wealth, they decided to make it the highest priority. We will settle here – even though Eretz Yisroel has a higher level of kedushoh. Moshe Rabbeinu realized that Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain were willing to give up the additional kedushoh of the land which is across the Yarden in order to have better grazing lands for their flocks. They were making compromises in their ruchniyus in order to maximize their material situation.

What is an accidental murderer? One who is careless about the preciousness of life. For someone who views himself primarily as a neshomo who sees the necessities of material life as just a means to an end, then life is very precious. You view yourself as a tzelem Elokim and view everyone else as a tzelem Elokim with the same level of preciousness. But if you don't care about your own tzelem Elokim because you prioritize other things above your ruchniyus, then you also care less about someone else's life.

Chazal say one should be wary about being alone in the presence of an am ho'oretz. Why? He doesn't prioritize spirituality and his tzelem Elokim doesn't mean much to him. He really doesn't value his own life and your tzelem Elokim doesn't mean much to him either. People who drive recklessly on the roads are showing that they don't have a high value for life generally – not for others and not for their own.

What happened here is very simple. People develop priorities in life. If you receive a significant amount of wealth, how do you react? How does it change you?

Klal Yisroel defeated an entire country with just 12,000 soldiers! And none fell in battle! It doesn't make logical sense. It was obviously a gift from Hashem. But what did Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain do with this gift? They let it become a major factor in directing their whole approach to life. It made them compromise on the level of kedushoh

they could have achieved, in order to maintain and expand that gift. This is not why Hashem gave that gift! Once they did that, Moshe Rabbeinu realized he has to bring Bnei Torah there to stop them from declining further, and they need extra orei miklot because they will be sloppy about the preciousness of life.

In the end, these shevatim went into golus first. Their society didn't last as long as the rest of Klal Yisroel.

There are very deep lessons here in this parsha.

Throughout life, we make a lot of major decisions. Where you want to live, how do you want to make a parnossoh. What is the basis of these decisions? What role does your desire to live a spiritual life play in that decision?

Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain got wealthy very quickly and they decided that they are making it their highest priority. It led to disaster – and Moshe Rabbeinu saw it coming. They were turning their back on Hashem and were adopting the evil path in life chosen by the generation of the midbor. They didn't want to go into Eretz Yisroel to achieve the maximum in avodas Hashem.

This is the tragedy of Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain.

These people didn't do any aveiros. They didn't kill anyone. They received a gift from Hashem and they allowed it to corrupt them. It is an unbelievable lesson about how to make decisions in life. They simply settled for less than the maximum in ruchniyus. How do you choose where to live? Is it based on the chinuch opportunities your children will have? Or how nice the houses are?

There is a machlokes between the Rambam and the Ran about the issur of bittul Torah. The Ran says that there is a mitzvah of Talmud Torah all day and all night. But there are allowances to do things that are necessary throughout the day – eating, sleeping, parnossoh, etc. But when you finish those activities, the chiyuv to learn comes right back. There is no minimum. The Rambam says there is a minimum chiyuv of Talmud Torah which is some learning in the morning and night. Does that mean there is no issur of bittul Talmud Torah according to the Rambam? Hardly. The Rambam learns from the posuk:

כי דבר ה' בזה ואת מצותו הפר הכרת תכרת הנפש הוא עונה בה: that whenever you have a choice between learning and doing some optional activity, and you choose the optional activity over learning, it is a violation of 'dvar Hashem bozoh'. You have degraded Hashem's Torah by making learning Torah priority #2 and putting something else as priority #1. Whenever you make a decision, Torah has to be the first priority. This is a gross insult to the Torah.

We always have to remember to make Torah number one.

We make this kind of decision about our priorities in life in many different ways. Bnei Gad and Bnei Reuvain showed that wealth was their highest priority and Torah was number two, and it led to their undoing. They were the first to go into golus.