

Parshas Bo

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1. Complication Emanates from Man's Self-Interest

The Torah tells us that Hashem commanded Moshe to present himself before Pharaoh to prove that he is the agent of G'd by transforming his staff into a snake. Moshe did as he was commanded to do. Pharaoh summoned his sorcerers and magicians, who also transformed their staffs into snakes. Pharaoh was unmoved with Moshe. The Torah concludes, **"...and the staff of Aaron swallowed their staffs. Pharaoh hardened his heart and he did not heed them as Hashem had spoken."**

Rashi cites the Gemara in Tractate Shabbos which points out that the verse does not state that Aaron's snake swallowed their snakes, but rather that his "staff" swallowed their staffs. This was to indicate that the transformation of Moshe and Aaron's staff was definitely not witchcraft but was the Hand of Hashem. Nevertheless Pharaoh hardened his heart and dismissed it as sorcery and not the Hand of G'd. If Pharaoh had in fact believed that Moshe's accomplishment was due to witchcraft, then why does the Torah predicate Pharaoh's position on the hardening of his heart?

The verse that follows states, **"Hashem said to Moshe, 'Pharaoh's heart is stubborn, he refuses to send out the people...'"** Meaning, the reason Pharaoh did not discern between what Moshe had done and the actions of the sorcerers was that he had chosen to harden his heart because he did not wish to send out the Jewish people. Seemingly, the Torah is telling us that if he would not have chosen to be obstinate, he would have clearly appreciated Moshe's action as being miraculous and thus would have sent out the people.

We see that regardless of the magnitude of an event, one is able to process it as he chooses and not be affected. A person has the ability to deny reality to accommodate his own agenda. Hashem elucidated this fact to Moshe - that it was not because the action that he had brought about was lacking; but rather, it was due to Pharaoh's choosing to harden his heart.

Rambam in *Hilchos Deos* states regarding establishing the ideal balance in a characteristic that he should seek out the equidistant point between the two extremes. For example, even if the characteristic that one possesses is positive – such as being overly generous- it is important for him to temper this characteristic to be able to act objectively regarding giving. Just as being miserly is obviously something that is negative, identically being overly generous is also considered something that is negative. One would think that possessing a good characteristic on an extreme level would be considered something positive.

The human being is differentiated from the animal by his ability to reason, process, and evaluate. The animal has no such capability; but rather, functions through instinct. A person can only make a proper evaluation if he is able to assume a position of objectivity. Otherwise, his evaluation would be flawed because of his own conflicts of interest- whatever they may be. If one's conflict is that he is overly generous (he has a need to give) then even if the cause that he chooses to support is something that does not deserve any acknowledgement, he will choose to ignore the obvious. He will support the cause despite its unworthiness. How is this person's behavior any different from an animal that functions purely on instinct? This person's response to

the cause is instinctive rather than rational. Thus, in order to maximize on one's endowment of intelligence (which is the essence of the human being), one must try to establish a position of objectivity through moderating his characteristics. He must seek out the equidistant point of that characteristic in order to attain the ultimate in objectivity.

The Torah is telling us that despite the fact that Pharaoh was the monarch of the most advanced civilization in existence, (who could have only been qualified as such because he was the most intelligent and discerning person), chose to deny the obvious because he did not want to send out the Jewish people. The cause of his denial was his own conflict of interest.

We classify ourselves as being one type of person, yet our behavior indicates to the contrary. If one identifies as an observant Jew and truly has an interest to live as such, then why does one very often transgress the Torah? It is only because he chose to act instinctively rather than rationally to accommodate his own interest, thus, hardening his heart (not allowing himself to be affected) as Pharaoh had done.

2. G'd – the Omnipotent Being

The Torah states before the onset of the plagues, ***“V'yadaber Elokim al Moshe...Ani Hashem...- G'd spoke to Moshe... I am Hashem.”*** “Elokim” is the appellation for G'd which connotes the Attribute of Justice, while the appellation “Hashem” connotes the Attribute of Mercy. Ohr HaChaim HaKadosh explains that the Torah uses both appellations to indicate that through the plagues, the Attribute of Justice and Mercy were both simultaneously in effect. The Egyptians experienced the Attribute of Justice through the plagues which brought hardship and devastation upon them. However, simultaneously, the Jewish people were the beneficiaries of these plagues because their masters and oppressors were punished. In addition, by witnessing the Hand of G'd and seeing Divine Retribution upon the evil, their belief in G'd was elevated. Thus, the Jewish people were beneficiaries of the Attribute of Mercy.

The Torah tells us that the objective of the plagues was to demonstrate in the most obvious and revealed manner that there is no other power similar to G'd. Only He is the Omnipotent and Infinite Being who transcends nature. This was revealed in the most convincing manner through the plague of hail, which had two contradictory forces functioning in conjunction. Rashi cites the Midrash which states that although fire and water in the context of nature can not coexist (because one extinguishes the other), nevertheless, regarding the plague of hail, these two forces made peace with one another in order to do the Will of their Maker. Thus, the plague of hail highlighted that contrary to Egyptian belief that all deities were limited and constrained by the natural order, G'd transcends nature and is not a limited Being. The Torah states that after Pharaoh had experienced this plague he initially reacted by saying, ***“This time I have sinned, Hashem is the Righteous One, and I and my people are the wicked ones...”***

At the beginning of the Portion of Bo the Torah communicates to us the objective of the plagues, ***“...I have made his (Pharaoh) heart and the heart of his servants stubborn so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst; and so that you may relate in the ears of your sons***

and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I have placed among them- that you may know that I am Hashem." Seemingly the Torah is telling us that if the Jewish people communicate to their children (from generation to generation) how G'd had made a mockery of Egypt, it will be an indication that they know that "I am G'd." This infers that if they do not communicate this to their children, there is a basis to question the quality of their belief. What is the correlation between relating how G'd made a "mockery" of Egypt and believing in G'd?

The Gemara in Tractate Niddah tells us that at the time of conception, an angel brings the droplet of semen before Hashem, who pronounces upon it the destiny of that individual, "Wise or foolish, strong or weak, wealthy or poor..." The only pronouncement that G'd does not make on the droplet is "tzaddik (righteous) or rasha (evil)." The Gemara concludes that all is predestined except for one's fear of heaven.

The fact that Pharaoh was the king of Egypt was only because G'd had initially pronounced that he should be so. Hashem is *the* one who coronates kings. As we say during the Rosh HaShanah Service, "He coronates kings, but to Him is the Kingdom..." Pharaoh believed differently. He believed that he was the king of Egypt because of his own greatness. Hashem brought the plagues upon Egypt to demonstrate to the Jewish people that all that transpires in existence is due to G'd Willing it to be so. Pharaoh was no more than a mere puppet being controlled by the Puppeteer. Despite his own belief that he assumed the kingship of Egypt due to his own initiative and greatness, the plagues demonstrated differently. They proved that although he believed that he was in control, it was obvious that he was not. Thus, by relating how G'd made a "mockery" of the Egyptians, it is a confirmation of one's belief in Hashem – that He is the Omnipotent Being and Pharaoh was nothing more than a pawn. If one were to be impressed by the power of Pharaoh, rather than attributing it to its true source, it would be an indication that he is lacking in the understanding of "I am Hashem."

The Torah tells us that the Jewish midwives (Yocheved and Miriam) defied Pharaoh's order to kill the Jewish male newborns because they "feared G'd." When Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, summoned them to explain why they did not heed his order, the Torah tells us that they replied to the king as "Pharaoh" and not "the king of Egypt." The Torah is revealing that the Jewish midwives were not impressed with his position as "king." The Jewish midwives understood that there was no reason to fear a mortal king. It was G'd who allowed Pharaoh to function in the position of "king." Thus, if the Jewish people communicate to their children and families how G'd made a mockery of the Egyptians, they are communicating to them that Pharaoh was ruler of Egypt only because Hashem placed him there and Egypt was the most advanced civilization only because G'd Willed it to be so.

One of the thirteen principles of Jewish faith states that a Jew must believe that there is a system of reward and punishment. The world advances itself and is the recipient of G'd's blessing if the Jew adheres to the dictates of G'd. Conversely, blessing to the world is withheld if the Jew does not adhere to the Torah. Because the Jewish people empower creation with G'd's Blessing, one could mistakenly believe that it is not G'd who brings blessing upon the world; but rather, it is the individual himself who causes the world to rise and fall based on his own actions. At the time of redemption, this mistake could not have been made. The Jews knew and understood that they were unworthy of being redeemed. They were idolaters like the Egyptians. Nevertheless, G'd redeemed them in the most magnanimous manner – despite their personal lack of worthiness.

G'd only brought about redemption on a supernatural level because it was important for the Jewish people and the world to understand the fact and reality that there is no other Being similar to G'd – the Omnipotent and All-Encompassing Being. G'd made a mockery of Pharaoh and Egypt to demonstrate that in fact he was not an independent being, but rather a mere mortal that was subject to the Attribute of Justice. G'd redeemed the Jewish people, not because of their worthiness, but because He is “Hashem” – demonstrating the Attribute of Mercy.

3. Moshe Reflecting G'd's Essence

The Torah states, **“Hashem said to Moshe, ‘...Please speak in the ears of the people: Let each man request of his fellow and each woman from her fellow, silver vessels and gold vessels.’ Hashem granted the people favor in the eyes of Egypt; moreover, the man Moshe was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh and the eyes of the people.”** The Torah tells us that Hashem commanded Moshe to “Please” speak to the Jewish people to tell them to borrow the silver and gold vessels of the Egyptians. The Torah uses the term “Please” to indicate that Moshe needed to beseech the people to do so.

Rashi cites the Gemara in Tractate Berachos which explains that the reason Moshe needed to plead with the Jewish people to comply with his request was so that both aspects of the promise made by Hashem to Avraham, our Patriarch, would be fulfilled. The Gemara states, “So that Avraham the elder should not say that the decree – they shall be enslaved and afflicted for 400 years - was fulfilled and – afterwards they would go out with great wealth- was not fulfilled.” Thus, Moshe needed to beseech the Jewish people. If the Egyptians were willing to lend their personal affects to the Jewish people without difficulty, why did Moshe need to plead with his people to make the request of the Egyptians?

The Torah tells us that Hashem caused the Jewish people to find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Seemingly, had Hashem not done so, the Egyptian people would have not lent their valuables. Despite the fact that the Egyptians had experienced nine of the ten plagues and witnessed Egypt reduced to rubble, they would have not willingly lent their vessels to the Jews, had they not perceived them as being special. Thus, Hashem caused the Jewish people to be seen as special by the Egyptian people.

If an average person, with financial means, requests of a lender to borrow money, the lender may refuse him - despite the fact that the potential borrower could secure the loan requested. However if a renowned individual were to make the same request, the lender would acquiesce to accommodate the request of the borrower. Why is this the case? It is because when an individual responds to the request of an average person, he is only doing so in order to accommodate their needs. However when one responds to the request of a renowned individual, he is acquiescing in order to accommodate himself since he feels he has served a renowned person. The lender himself is in fact the beneficiary of the kindness. Thus, the Egyptians would only lend their valuables to the Jewish people if they perceived them as being special. In order to accomplish this, Hashem caused the Jewish people to find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Had the Egyptians understood their predicament and the value of the Jewish people – as the nation of

Hashem – they would have given them the vessels without the need of Hashem intervening.

It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of the passage discussing the fact that Hashem caused the Jewish people to find favor in the eyes of Egypt, the verse concludes, “... **moreover the man Moshe was very great in the land of Egypt, in the eyes of the servants of Pharaoh...**” Seemingly, this is superfluous since the Torah had already stated that the Jewish people found favor in the eyes of the Egyptians. Why is Moshe singled out in this manner? Baal Haturim explains regarding “*gam ha ishe Moshe – moreover the man Moshe...*” if one were to read the last letters of each word in reverse, it spells the word “Hashem.” Additionally, he explains that if one were to read the letters of the name “Moshe” in reverse it also spells “Hashem.” How do we understand this?

After the Egyptians had experienced nine out of the ten plagues, they no longer regarded Moshe as a sorcerer or a magician. When they witnessed the plague of hail, which was the coexistence of fire and water, the Egyptians understood that Moshe was acting on behalf of Hashem – who is the Omnipotent Being who dictates nature. There was nothing similar to Hashem. Even the Egyptians realized that Moshe was G’d’s agent. Thus, Moshe was synonymous with Hashem because he was perceived as His agent. Moshe was able to achieve his advanced level of spirituality only because he had completely negated himself. Thus, Moshe in essence was a total reflection of Hashem’s Presence. He was the most humble person who ever lived.

Sforno explains that the reason the Torah uses the expression, “...**Please speak in the ears of the people...**” is to relate that Moshe needed to plead with the Jewish people to request the vessels from the Egyptians. They did not want to do this because they were afraid that the Egyptians would ultimately pursue them if they left Egypt with their valuables. They understood that they were about to leave Egypt. They did not want to incite the Egyptians so that they should follow them. Sforno concludes that the reason the Jewish people needed to take the vessels was because, “it is through this that they will be redeemed.” Seemingly the exodus and the ultimate salvation of the Jewish people would come about only if they borrowed the vessels of the Egyptians. How do we understand this?

Chazal tell us that the reason the Egyptians chose to destroy the Jewish male children by water, rather than any other means, was because they believed that G’d could not retaliate against them. They reasoned that G’d’s manner of retribution is “measure for measure.” If in fact this is so, the Egyptian people could not be punished through water because G’d had made a covenant with existence (after the Great Flood) that He would never again bring a flood upon the world. Thus, the Egyptians believed that they were impervious to G’d’s punishment for drowning the Jewish children. However, they were mistaken. The Midrash tells us that G’d had promised that He would never bring a flood upon the world; however, if the Egyptians were to come on their own volition to the water they would be drowned in it (measure for measure). Thus, by the Jewish people taking the borrowed vessels out of Egypt, it caused the Egyptians to pursue them and ultimately be drowned in the Sea. Therefore, it was through the borrowing of the vessels that the Jewish people were truly redeemed from the Egyptians. Nevertheless, Moshe needed to plead with the Jewish people to borrow their valuables because they did not understand this. They were able to come to this level of belief only after the Sea had closed upon the Egyptians.

People often choose to hide their Judaism. They believe that by not overtly behaving as an observant Jew they will find favor in the eyes of the world. This is not the case. As we see from the borrowing of the vessels, that it was only because G'd caused the Jewish people to find favor in the eyes of the Egyptians, that the Jews were considered special. It is only when the Jew does what he is supposed to do – adhering to all the dictates of the Torah – despite how it appears or how it is understood by the world. Then we can we truly merit redemption.

4. The Paramount Importance of Humility

The Torah tells us that G'd gave the Jewish people the mitzvah of circumcision and the mitzvah of the Pascal offering as a prerequisite for their redemption. It is stated in Yechezkel, “And you are naked and devoid (of mitzvos).” Since the Jewish people were devoid of spirituality in Egypt, they were in need of a spiritual infusion – which was the opportunity to perform mitzvos. In order for the Jewish people to have spiritual worthiness, Hashem presented them with the mitzvos of circumcision and the Pascal lamb. As the Prophet Yechezkel concludes, “It is through the bloods that you shall live...” – the Gemara explains that the term “bloods” is referring to the blood of circumcision and the blood of the Pascal lamb. If Hashem wanted to give the Jewish people spiritual worthiness, why did He choose to bestow upon them the Positive Commandments of circumcision and the Pascal lamb? Seemingly, it would have been sufficient to offer them another Positive Commandment such as that of tzitzis (fringes on a four-cornered garment)?

On a simple level, one could say that since the Jewish people became pagans (idolaters) in Egypt, they could only merit redemption by rejecting and divorcing themselves from their idolatrous past. Thus, by slaughtering the deity of Egypt (the sheep), it was a demonstration and declaration that they no longer were connected with idol worship. Regarding the mitzvah of circumcision, it is referred to as, “the sign of the holy covenant.” By circumcising themselves, it was an indication that they identified with G'd – as it is stated, “It is the covenant engraved in our flesh.”

However, on a more profound level one could say that in order to be redeemed from Egypt, the Jewish people needed to demonstrate self-negation for the sake of G'd. Despite the fact that they were still under the domination of their masters – the Egyptians, by slaughtering the deity of Egypt the Jewish people adhered to G'd's Dictate – regardless of the danger to their lives. They slaughtered the lamb as they were commanded to do. This was a demonstration of self-negation.

The Midrash tells us that on the Shabbos preceding the 14th of Nissan (the day the Pascal lamb was to be brought as an offering), the Egyptian masters entered into the homes of the Jews and noticed that each family had a sheep tied to their bedposts. They had asked, “What are you doing with the sheep?” The Jews had answered, “We are going to slaughter it as an offering to our G'd.” The Egyptian masters gritted their teeth and walked out. This is the basis for the Shabbos preceding Pesach to be called, the “Great Shabbos (Shabbos HaGadol).” It is the Shabbos that the Jewish people experienced a miracle –they were not killed by their masters. Because of the Jewish people's subordination to the Will of Hashem, they were not deterred by concern for their personal safety.

The act of circumcision is another level of self-negation. A male is born naturally uncircumcised. It would seem irrational to remove the foreskin. Seemingly, it would be viewed as self-mutilation. In addition, not only were the newborn males to be circumcised but all Jewish males (regardless of age) were subject to circumcision – despite the physical pain. Thus, demonstrating a total subordination to the Will of G'd. Therefore, Hashem chose these specific Positive Commandments which inherently require selfless dedication to be the prerequisite for redemption.

The Midrash tells us that when G'd had offered the Torah to the nations of the world, they asked, "What is written in it?" Hashem responded to each nation accordingly and afterwards each nation chose to reject the Torah. Had any of the nations agreed to accept the Torah after hearing what was written in it, their level of acceptance would have been considered deficient because it was predicated on their own self-interest. Contrastingly, the Jewish people, when they were offered the Torah at Sinai, their response was, "*Naaseh v'Nishmah* – we will do and we will listen." This response was a total negation of themselves. Accepting the Torah unequivocally – not knowing the extent of the obligation and commitment can only be made if one negates himself. Chazal tell us that the angels in heaven (when they heard the response of the Jewish people) were taken aback and said, "Who revealed this secret to My children?" Meaning, how could a mere mortal, who is naturally self-centered and absorbed, negate himself to this extent? Nevertheless this self-negation was a prerequisite for Sinai – for the Jewish people to become the Nation of G'd.

The reason Moshe merited to be the one to receive the Torah on behalf of the Jewish people and prophesize at a level of "face to face (with G'd)" was because he had totally negated himself. As the Torah states, "He was the most humble person on the face of the earth." Similarly, in order for the Jewish people to be worthy of receiving the Torah at the level on which it had to be communicated, they needed to achieve total negation. This was expressed through the declaration of "*Naaseh V' Nismah*." To be able to ultimately achieve this special level of negation, they needed to be given the mitzvos of circumcision and the Pascal offering, which were exercises in self-negation.

The only way one has the capacity to contain and process Torah properly is through the characteristic of self-negation. The Gemara in Tractate Taanis tells us that the Torah is compared to water - just as water flows from an elevated location to a lower one, so too the Torah can only be contained within a person who has a lowly spirit/humble. In order for one to have the qualification to acquire the Torah one must assume and develop a posture of humility - qualifying him to be the receptacle of Torah. This prerequisite was not only a necessity at the time of the giving of the Torah at Sinai, but it is a principle, which is true for all times

5. What Determines One's Classification?

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason Hashem caused the plague of darkness was to eliminate the *reshaim* (those who were evil) from the Jewish people. They had no interest in leaving Egypt. They perished during the days of darkness so that the

Egyptians would not be aware of their demise because they would say, “not only are we dying, but the Jews are also dying.” Rashi cites another Chazal that says the reason G’d brought the plague of darkness was to enable the Jews to inspect the homes of the Egyptians for their valuables. G’d promised Avraham at the time of the covenant between the parts that after the Jewish people were enslaved and afflicted in a land that was not theirs, they would go out with great riches; locating the valuables of the Egyptians during the days of darkness allowed that promise to come to fruition. Thereafter, the Egyptians were not able to say that they did not possess valuables such as gold and silver vessels.

In the Portion of Beshalach, Rashi cites Chazal who explain the word “chamushim” to mean that only one fifth of the Jewish people actually left Egypt. (Another Midrash states that only one fiftieth of the Jews left Egypt.) This would mean that four fifths of the Jewish population was classified as *reshaim* (evil) and therefore perished during the plague of darkness. Everyone in Egypt witnessed the revealed miracles of Hashem, who caused the most powerful empire to be reduced to rubble. If this is the case, why would any Jew not want to leave Egypt when the opportunity was at hand, especially after all those years of bondage and suffering. Additionally, what is even more astounding is that unlike Pharaoh and the Egyptians, Hashem did not “harden the heart” of the Jewish people. Therefore, they had the ability to internalize the miracles of which they were the beneficiaries.

In the Musaf Service of Rosh Hashanah in the portion of (*Zichronos* (Remembrances)), we cite a verse to remind Hashem of our relationship with Him. Hashem says, “I remember for your sake the kindness of your youth...how you followed Me into an unplanted desert.” This verse seems difficult to understand. Since we had already witnessed the ten revealed miracles – events that were unprecedented in the history of the world, why would Hashem consider it a “kindness” that we followed Him into the desert? Evidently, despite all that had transpired in Egypt it was difficult for the Jews to leave. On the one hand, Jews who did not wish to leave Egypt are referred to as *reshaim*. On the other hand, Hashem will always remember the kindness of the Jews who did leave. This seems to indicate that leaving Egypt and following Him into an “unplanted desert” was a commendable feat. If in fact it was so difficult to leave Egypt, as it is indicated from this verse, then why are those who chose to remain in Egypt considered *reshaim*?

In fact, not being a *rasha* (evil person) is an accomplishment; however, it does not change the reality that if a person behaves in an evil manner he is evil. Rambam states in *Hilchos Taanias (the Laws of Fasting)* that if difficult times come upon the Jewish people, G’d forbid, and one does not pray, he is considered “cruel.” If other Jews are suffering and one does not pray for them, it is evident that he does not feel their pain. Thus it is an indication that there is a degree of cruelty in that person. The one who does pray on behalf of others demonstrates sensitivity to the suffering of his fellow Jew because he feels their pain. Either one is classified as “sensitive” or not; there is no middle ground.

Despite the fact that all the Jews witnessed the same revealed miracles in Egypt, there were many who did not wish to leave. These Jews were considered *reshaim* because they did not believe that they were going to survive in the desert. Despite the revealed miracles, which were performed on their behalf, they did not have sufficient faith in Hashem that He would provide for them in the desert. The minority of Jews who merited leaving Egypt did have the faith and therefore did not succumb to the insecurities of the others. Because they trusted Hashem, they were able to see things clearly. However resisting the temptation to succumb to the insecurity of the others was truly an

accomplishment. They thus followed G'd into the "unplanted desert." It was only because of that special level of faith and trust that they were able to go into an uninhabitable location. This is "kindness of our youth" that Hashem will never forget.

The Jews who died during the plague of darkness were considered reshaim, while those who left Egypt and entered into the desert were highly regarded and rewarded by Hashem. We see that depending on a person's faith and perspective of life, he is either classified in one group or the other. When we hear about tragedies that befall our brothers in Israel or any other location in the world, are we affected? Do we feel the pain and suffering of our fellow Jew and thus increase and intensify our tefillos (prayers)? If one remains unaffected by these events, then he must understand why. If one truly has the sensitivity, he surely would feel the pain. According to this self-evaluation, one must reflect on and understand his own classification. Is it one of cruelty? Or is it one of compassion and sensitivity?