

LEARNING THE HARD WAY

by Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky

1. The Importance of Putting Things in Perspective

The Torah states, "Hashem said to Moshe, "Come to Pharaoh, for I have made his heart and the hearts 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 son and your son's son that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I placed among them - that you may know that I am Hashem." Hashem says to Moshe that one of the reasons He brought the plagues upon Egypt is so the Jewish people should communicate to their children and their grandchildren that Hashem made a "mockery" of Egypt. What is the significance of relating this? Seemingly the significance of the miracles was, "so that you may know that I am Hashem." The Torah is saying that unless one appreciates the consequence of the miracle, that G-d made a "mockery" of Egypt, one is not able to know that G-d is the Omnipotent Power. The question is why?

There is a Negative Commandment in the Torah that a judge is not permitted to be intimidated by anyone when he is adjudicating a case. Regardless of the status of individuals involved (wealthy or powerful), a judge must maintain his objectivity and remain unbiased. If a judge is influenced, intimidated, or affected to the point that he feels restrained to any degree vis-à-vis his function, then he is in violation of this negative commandment.

The Gemara in Tractate Berachos tells us that greater is a person who benefits from the toil of his hands than one who fears Hashem. Is it possible to say that a menial laborer is greater than a man who fears G-d? It is obvious that the "laborer who benefits from the toil of his hands" is a person who fears G-d. The Gemara is saying that a man who fears G-d and is supported by his own toil is greater than a person who fears G-d and is sustained by others. The reason for this is that the one who relies on others is bound to be swayed and affected by them. He makes decisions consciously or unconsciously based on how he believes others will react or perceive him and not the way Hashem sees him. Thus the individual who benefits from the toil of his own hands and fears G-d, will be directed by the Will of Hashem alone and be impervious to the opinions of others.

People are impressed and awed by status and power. The Torah tells us that Egypt, the most advanced and powerful civilization in the world was devastated by G-d because it subjugated the Jewish people. Pharaoh, the most significant monarch in existence, was significantly diminished because he did not release the Jewish people from bondage. Although one would think that

Pharaoh was a person who was invincible, it was proven that he was a mere mortal. The reason it is important to communicate to our children and grandchildren the "mockery" Hashem made of Pharaoh and his people, is to give them the understanding that although a person is in an exalted and elevated position, he is only there because it is Willed by Hashem. Only when one sees the unimaginable (such as the downfall of Egypt), can he appreciate what the basis is for every person's predicament. If one understands and is able to internalize this, he will know the meaning of "I am Hashem." If one believes for a moment that achievement and success is attributed to oneself, then he will be impressed with the one who achieves that success, thus, diminishing Hashem's role in existence.

The Rambam and the Ramban argue whether the obligation of prayer is a Torah obligation or only a rabbinical dictate. The Rambam is of the opinion that tefillah (daily prayer) is a Torah obligation; as the Talmud explains, tefillah is the "service of the heart." One would think that tefillah is simply the acknowledgement of Hashem - that He is great, powerful, etc. That He sustains the living, resurrects the dead, supports the fallen, and heals the sick etc. However, Rambam says that if one only acknowledges Hashem for what He is and does not make subsequent requests of Him, one does not fulfill the Torah obligation of tefillah. The question is why? The answer is that if in fact Hashem is the all-powerful, awesome, and omnipotent Being, then how is it possible that one does not beseech him for his needs. When one beseeches Hashem for his needs it is a confirmation of all the attributes he has been citing in his prayer. If however, one acknowledges Hashem as being everything and does not make requests from Him, then it is an indication that he truly does not believe that Hashem is what he had acknowledged Him to be. The value of his statement is purely "lip service."

2. What Determines One's Classification?

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason Hashem caused the plague of darkness was to eliminate the reshayaim (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 "chamashim" 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 reshayaim (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 reshayaim. 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 reshayaim?

The answer is that not being a rasha (evil person) is in fact an accomplishment; however, it does not change the reality that an evil person 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 it is evident that he does not feel their pain and this indicates that there is a degree of cruelty in that person. The one who does pray has sensitivity to the suffering of his fellow Jew because he feels their pain. This is an example of how two people relate differently to the identical situation.

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 reshayaim because they did believe that they were going to survive in the desert. Despite the revealed miracles which were performed for them, they did not have faith in Hashem and thus did not trust 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 had faith, they were able to see things clearly. However not succumbing to the doubts and questions that surrounded them and thus following Hashem into the "unplanted desert" was truly an accomplishment. It was only because of that special level of faith and trust that they were able to go into the desert. This is why Hashem will always remember the "kindness" of our youth.

The Jews who died during the plague of darkness were considered reshayaim, 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 outlook on life, he is classified in one group or the other. When we hear about tragedies that befall our brothers in Israel or any place in the world, do they affect us? Do

we feel the pain and suffering of our fellow Jew and thus increase our tefillos (prayers)? If one remains unaffected by these events, then he needs to understand why. If one truly has the sensitivity, he surely would feel the pain. According to this evaluation, one must reflect on his own classification. Is it one of cruelty? Or is it one of compassion and sensitivity?

3. The Hidden Message in the Sanctification of the New Moon

The Torah states, "Hashem said to Moshe and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, "This month shall be for you the beginning of the months, it shall be for you the first of the months of the year..." Before the Jewish people left Egypt, they were given the mitzvah of the Sanctification of the New Moon. This was the first mitzvah given to them as a Jewish people.

The mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon enables the Jewish people to determine when the month actually begins - thus determining time. 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 through the Sanhedrin's pronouncement of the beginning of the new month. In fact, the blessing, which we recite during the festivals, concludes: "Hashem has sanctified the Jewish people who in turn sanctify time." Why was this Mitzvah the first one to be given to us as a Jewish People?

On a practical level, the sanctification of time was necessary at that moment to establish the day of the month 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 to determine when the fourteenth would be. However, G-d could have designated the beginning of Nissan Himself, and thus everything would have followed. As the Gemara states, if the witnesses did not testify before the Sanhedrin by a certain date then the month is sanctified by Heaven. If this the case, why was the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon the first commandment given to the Jewish people

Time is a reality of existence. Man lives within the boundary of time and it dictates his existence. Time is continuously moving forward with or without our involvement. If this is the case then how does a mere mortal affect and determine time? How could the decision of the court determine the beginning of the month and thus establish when Pesach begins? The ramification of this is the sanctification of the month. The same is true with the Day of Judgment (Rosh Hashana) and Yom Kippur (The Day of Atonement). The court's decision determines when G-d will judge the world and which day will have the inherent effect to rehabilitate the penitent. How is this possible?

Hashem gave the Jewish people the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon to indicate to them that

they are not mere mortals and their significance is spiritual. Thus, Jews are not necessarily bound by time, but rather they affect time.

At the time of the exodus when the Jews were leaving Egypt, they were ascending from the lowest level of spirituality. They were pagans just like their Egyptian masters. The Jews knew they had a special ancestry, but they believed that there was no difference between themselves and the Egyptians. G-d wanted them to understand that they were not at all like the Egyptians or any other people in the world. He demonstrated this reality to them by giving them the ability to sanctify and affect the reality of time. This gave them an understanding of their essence - which is innately spiritual. Therefore, the first mitzvah that Hashem gave the Jews was the sanctification of the New Moon.

Rashi cites Chazal who explain that G-d needed to show Moshe the exact moment when the moon could be sanctified since Moshe had difficulty making this determination. They tell us that Moshe only had difficulty in three areas: knowing exactly when the new moon could be sanctified, understanding the machtzis ha'shekel (the half-shekel coin given by all Jewish males above the age of twenty to be used to purchase communal offerings in the Temple), and the making of the Menorah. These were the only areas in which Moshe had difficulty understanding how to fulfill Hashem's Will. How do we understand this?

The Gemara in Tractate Bava Basra tells us that the Menorah signifies the Oral Law, which is unlimited in its depth and breadth. Moshe was commanded to cast it. However, being a finite and limited being, he found it difficult to understand how to cast something that signified the infinite. He had trouble understanding how something that is limited to a physical context could affect something that is infinite. Hashem Himself cast the Menorah. Only the Infinite was able to cast something that affects the infinite.

Every male of the age twenty and above was required to give half a silver coin (machtzis ha'shekel). Moshe found it difficult to understand this process even though it seems to be a simple task of collecting the machtzis ha'shekel. Since the machtzis ha'shekel's purpose was used to purchase offerings, it had relevance to kaparah (atonement) and teshuvah (repentance), which are spiritual processes and realities. Thus, the machtzis ha'shekel, which is something finite, represents something of an unlimited nature. Spirituality is something out of the realm of existence. In fact, Chazal tell us that Hashem created teshuvah many generations before the world was created. It is therefore understandable why Moshe had difficulty with machtzis ha'shekel. The Midrash tells us that Hashem showed him a coin made of fire to give him some degree of understanding.

We can now explain why Moshe had difficulty understanding the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon. The calendar of the nations of the world is the solar calendar. However, the Jew determines time through the lunar cycle. The moon represents the Jewish people because throughout history there were times that we were hardly noticed and there were times that we were in full view to the

world (as the phases of the moon). Therefore, the moon represents something spiritual - which is beyond the human capacity, that is limited and finite. Therefore, Moshe had difficulty determining the exact moment the moon was large enough to be sanctified.

The three areas of Moshe's difficulty involved a physical entity representing the spiritual, which is unlimited. Each Jew must give the machtzis ha'shekel (the half coin and not the whole coin). The question is why does one give a half coin if he could give a whole one. The half coin represents a fraction of the whole, just as when we contemplate the Jew, we can never comprehend his totality; we only see a fraction of his value and cannot appreciate or understand his significance even on an individualized basis. The Mishna tells us, "Whoever saves the life of a Jew it is considered as if he had saved the entire world." One Jew alone is the equivalent of the entire world in terms of inherent worth. Therefore, it is something that is not comprehensible. This is the same reason why Hashem gave the Jewish people the mitzvah of sanctifying the new moon so that we should understand that although we are physical beings our significance is spiritual and therefore we are able to affect time.

4. Understanding the Value of Circumcision

The Torah states, "Pharaoh said to Moshe and Aaron, "Go and serve Hashem, your G-d; which ones are going?" Moshe said, "With our youngsters and with our elders shall we go; with our sons and with our daughters, with our flock and with our cattle shall we go..." Pharaoh said to him, "...Look - the evil (raah) intent is opposite your faces. Not so; let the men go now..." The Torah tells us that Pharaoh did not want to allow all the Jews to leave Egypt because "the evil (raah) intent is opposite your faces." Rashi cites the Midrash that explains the verse to mean that Pharaoh, through his stargazing ability, saw that there is a star called "Raah" which indicated "bloodshed" - meaning that the Jews would be killed in the desert. Therefore, Pharaoh refused to allow the Jews to leave.

The Midrash continues to explain that because of the chet ha'agle (sin of the golden calf) Hashem wanted to destroy the Jewish people. However, Moshe's tefillah (prayer) averted the destruction and the Jews were forgiven. This is what Pharaoh actually had seen in the stars. Hashem said that the "bloodshed" which is being foretold through the stars will not be the destruction of the Jewish people, but will be the circumcision of the Jews at the time of Yehoshua (the successor of Moshe). During the forty years of wandering in the desert, the Jews did not circumcise themselves. This only occurred when the mantle of leadership was passed from Moshe to Yehoshua (his disciple) when they were about to enter into the Land of Canaan. This blood was exchanged for the blood which represented the destruction of the Jewish people that Pharaoh had seen.

Pharaoh's stargazers told him that they saw in the stars that the demise of the Redeemer of Israel would come about through water. They interpreted this to mean that the Redeemer would die through drowning. As a result, Pharaoh decreed that all the Jewish newborn males should be thrown into the Nile. In that instance, the demise of Moshe through water was correctly interpreted; however, the manner in which it would come about was misunderstood. Their expertise as

astrologers was at the most advanced level. Therefore, the only mistake that can be made was the application of the reading.

When Pharaoh saw the star named Raah, which represents "bloodshed" - indicating that the lives of the Jews will be taken, how was it possible that this reading of "bloodshed" should be converted into the blood of circumcision? Bloodshed is associated with the taking of a life. The person who existed no longer exists. However, circumcision entails bleeding because of the removal of the foreskin, but it has no relevance to the demise of a human being. If this is the case, then how was the bloodshed represented by the star Raah changed to mean "circumcision"?

We can learn something rather profound from this Midrash. The Midrash is telling us that just as when one's life is taken, the person who existed before, no longer exists, similarly, the person who is circumcised is not the same person that existed before the circumcision - that former person no longer exists. This is the profound impact that circumcision has on a person. It is a metamorphosis that transforms the person into a different being. Therefore, the blood of circumcision is compared to the "bloodshed" which causes the person who existed "to exist no longer."

Why is circumcision which is referred to as "the sign of the Holy Covenant" so effective that it transforms the individual to another dimension of person that did not previously exist? The Olalos Ephraim explains that just as there is an outer covering (the foreskin), there is also an inner (spiritual) covering over the heart. When the outer covering is removed (the foreskin), simultaneously the inner covering of the heart is also removed. This inner covering prevents a Jew from having any relevance to the wellsprings of Torah and his spirituality. The wellsprings of Torah are sealed until one is circumcised.

Before the circumcision is performed, the Jew has no relevance to internalizing and experiencing spirituality through the Torah. The Jew is merely a physical being who exists as a Jew. However, after the circumcision, he gains the capacity to internalize the spirituality of the Torah and relate to concepts and realities that were not available to him before circumcision. He becomes a new being whose function and significance becomes his spirituality. His significance within existence takes on another dimension of value. Therefore, circumcision, which entails blood, is the procedure that causes the person to become a different being that has not existed before. Thus, his previous "self" no longer exists. Therefore, what Pharaoh understood to be "bloodshed" is identical to the blood of circumcision.

The Gemara tells us that the Jewish people did not circumcise themselves during the 40-year period that they were in the desert. The reason for this was that during their years of wandering, the northerly wind "ruach tsefonis" did not blow. This northerly wind is essential for the clotting factor in the blood that causes wounds to heal. Therefore, it would have been life threatening for the Jews to circumcise themselves during this period because there was a concern that they could bleed to death.

It is interesting to note that in addition to the Jews wandering an additional 39 years in the desert, because of the chet ha'meraglim (the sin of the spies/ the slandering of the Land), Hashem caused the northerly wind not to blow. The question is although Hashem decreed that the Jews should wander as a punishment for their lack of faith, why did He withhold the northerly wind. We understand that the only value of withholding this wind was to deny the Jews the opportunity to circumcise themselves.

It was actually a chesed (kindness) of Hashem that He withheld the northerly wind making circumcision not possible. As we explained earlier, the Midrash tells us that the star of Raah forecasted the destruction of the Jewish people because of the golden calf. However, Moshe's tefillah brought about forgiveness. Hashem changed the "bloodshed" of the destruction of the Jewish people to the blood of circumcision. If Hashem had allowed the northerly wind to blow, there would not have been an interruption in performing the mitzvah of circumcision. In that case, the bloodshed indicated by the star Raah could not have been converted into the blood of circumcision because they would have already been circumcised. Therefore, it was a chesed of Hashem to the Klal Yisroel that He denied them the mitzvah of circumcision during their stay in the desert.

We must say that the sin of the golden calf was a precursor to the sin of the spies. Just as the golden calf only came about because the Jews did not have sufficient faith in G-d, believing the false reports of the spies was also due to their lack of faith in Hashem. Therefore, it was inevitable that after the sin of the golden calf the Jews would fail with the sin of the spies. Because of this, Hashem was able to alter the blood of the destruction to the blood of circumcision.

5. Understanding the Importance of Communication

The Torah tells us that the plague of killing the first-born included those who were taken captive and the non-Jewish slave class of Egypt. The question is why is the captive (who is not an Egyptian) deserving of the tenth plague? Why did Hashem need to kill their first-born also? Rashi cites Chazal who explain that Hashem killed the first born of the captives so that when the first-born of Egypt died it would not be attributed to the pagan deity of the under class punishing the Egyptian oppressors. Furthermore, the first-born of the slave class was killed in the plague because they participated in the enslavement of the Jew as well, rejoicing when they witnessed the Jews being enslaved by others. Thus, they deserved punishment.

When Moshe informed Pharaoh of the time that the plague would come upon Egypt, he said it would happen, "about midnight." Is it possible that Moshe said "about midnight" rather than "exactly at midnight" because he did not know precisely when midnight was? The Gemara in Tractate Berachos explains that Moshe certainly knew. However, the reason he told Pharaoh that the plague would take place "about midnight" was because he was concerned that the Egyptian astrologers may not be accurate in their calculation of time and would believe that it did not occur "exactly midnight" but rather before or after. If that happened, they would say that Moshe had deceived

them. Thus, Moshe said "about midnight" so as not to be accused of deception.

All the plagues up until this point happened exactly as Moshe had said they would. The plague of the first-born was the climax of the ten plagues. As the Torah tells us, at the time of this plague the screams were at a level never before heard in Egypt. This tells us the enormous dimension of the plague. Yet, if Moshe had said that the plague was to come "exactly at midnight" and the Egyptians did not perceive it to occur at exactly that moment, then they would have accused him of lying to them. The real question is - even if the onset of the plague was off by a moment - what difference would this make when they are experiencing a tragedy that had never been experienced in this world. How do we understand this?

The Torah tells us that when the plague happened, the Egyptians saw that multiple members of the same family died. Because of this they said, "we are all dying." This means that the plague was actually worse than Moshe had foretold. Rashi cites Chazal who explain that the reason more than one member in a household died was because the women committed adultery with multiple men. Those who died in the plague were the first-born of each of those adulterous men. Thus, Egyptians perceived the plague as being more severe than had been predicted by Moshe. They thought that they were all dying, when in fact it was actually only the first-born. We ask if the plague was more severe than had been originally foretold by Moshe, why are we not concerned that he will be accused of being a liar about this as well.

The answer is the Egyptian women who committed adultery with several men knew that many of their children were in actuality the first-born to their fathers. Even though the men themselves may not have known it, the truth was attainable and the reality was verifiable. Therefore, it could be proven that only the first-born were dying. However, only Hashem knows exactly when midnight comes, therefore, if the Egyptian astrologer should mistakenly miscalculate the moment, there was no way to verify it. Since Moshe was forewarning Pharaoh for the explicit purpose of making him understand that Hashem is the Omnipotent Being and All Encompassing G-d, he needed to express himself in a manner that would be accepted and believed.

It is clear that if a person has the ability to deny or deflect something that he does not want to acknowledge, he will use even something that is absurd for that denial. Therefore, it was important for Moshe to remove any distraction from the Egyptians so that they could have full recognition of what was taking place. A person is forced to accept the reality of G-d when there is no escape route. Hashem did not want there to be any escape route for the Egyptians. Therefore, it was an imperative that there should be no issues that could detract from the purpose of this plague, which was that everyone should recognize G-d as the all powerful and omnipotent Being.

6. Understanding One's Purpose

The Torah tells us that when Hashem brought the plague of pestilence upon the Egyptians, only their livestock perished; they were not affected. The livestock belonging to the Jewish people was

also unaffected. Hashem tells Moshe to go before Pharaoh and explain to him why the Egyptian people were spared from the pestilence. The Torah states, "For Now I (Hashem) could have sent My hand and stricken you and your people with the pestilence and you would have been obliterated from the earth. However, for this I have let you endure, in order to show you My strength and so that My Name may be declared throughout the world."

Chazal explain that the name "Shakai" (which is one of the unpronounceable Names of Hashem) means that although His Power is unlimited, Hashem has the ability to harness and limit it to the degree that He wishes. Ramban explains in his commentary on the Book of Bereishis, that since the Power of Hashem is unlimited, at the time of Creation when He said, "It should be...", the energy created should have evolved and continued to manifest itself without end. However, Hashem (Shakai) said, "Daai (enough)," thus the energy was restrained. When Hashem limited the effect of the pestilence to only the livestock, He proved to the Egyptians that although His Power is infinite, He has the ability to dictate, direct, and affect what He chooses. This is the meaning of the verse, "in order to show you My strength."

The Midrash tells us that because of pursuing the Jewish people in their flight from Egypt, the Egyptian army perished in the Sea, there was only one Egyptian survivor - Pharaoh himself. The Torah tells us that Pharaoh was spared so that he should understand and appreciate Hashem's ability, and thus declare His Name throughout the world. Hashem allowed him to live so that there would be someone other than the Jewish people to tell the world what had happened. Pharaoh, the monarch of Egypt, who initially defied G-d, was the one to tell the world. Chazal tell us he lived many years and ultimately became the King of Nineveh. We read in the Book of Yonah that not only did he personally do teshuvah (repented) when he heard the ominous warnings of Yonah, but he also compelled his community to return to Hashem.

When one overcomes a serious or life-threatening situation, the question he must ask himself is - why did Hashem spare me? Is it that He wants me to simply return to the workplace and continue my life as before? It is obvious that he must conclude Hashem saved him for another purpose. Based on the Torah's explanation of why Pharaoh was saved, we can say that Hashem spares people from tragedies so that they can appreciate His existence. If that is the reason Hashem spared Pharaoh, an evil pagan, it is logical that if Hashem spares us, His people, it is for us to recognize and appreciate His existence, and thus declare His Name.

We do not only come upon this realization through surviving a life-threatening situation. We can see the Hand of Hashem in existence through conception, pregnancy, and the birth process. The Gemara in Tractate Nidah states that from one droplet of colorless semen, a fetus develops into a child, made up of many components of different textures and colors. From one drop of semen, the child develops eyes, organs, blood, sinews, bones and most amazingly, intellect. If one focuses on nature alone, one can see the Hand of Hashem, which is truly miraculous.

We must ask ourselves why Hashem performed the miracle of creating us and continues to Will this ongoing Miracle? The explanation comes from the verse, "I have let you endure, in order to show you My strength and so that My Name may be declared throughout the world." From this, we understand that Hashem performs these miracles so that we should appreciate His continuous involvement in existence and thus declare His Name. The Jew acknowledges this purpose by living a life that conforms to the Torah.

7. Learning the Hard Way

Prior to the plague of Hail, the Torah states that Moshe said to Pharaoh (in the Name of Hashem), "You still tread upon My (Hashem's) people, not to send them out. Behold, at this time tomorrow I shall rain a very heavy hail, such as there has never been in Egypt...the hail shall descend upon them and they shall die." Hashem is saying to Pharaoh that since he did not release the Jewish people from bondage, it is an indication that he truly does not value them nor understand who they are. Therefore, Pharaoh was "treading" upon the Jewish people, which implies that he did not appreciate their existence. Otherwise, he would not have treated them the way that he did. The Torah juxtaposes the plague of hail, which devastated Egypt, to the statement, "You still tread upon My people" in order to communicate to Pharaoh that he will only understand who the Jewish people are when he experiences the consequences of "treading upon them." This is the plague of hail.

For example, if one scratches his hand it is not as severe as scratching his cornea. Because of the nature of this organ, the consequence of injuring an eye, even slightly, is greater than withstanding the same injury to a limb. Only when one experiences the consequence of injury, can one understand the delicate nature of that particular organ. Hashem wanted Pharaoh to understand that "treading" on His people has grave consequences. The plagues that had come upon Egypt, prior to the plague of hail, had not yet taught Pharaoh the lesson of valuing the Jewish people because he continued to "tread" upon them. Therefore, the plague of hail was necessary.

The way one treats and behaves towards one's fellow indicates the degree to which he values him. One only insults or damages another person if he does not value that individual's existence. The Torah juxtaposes the principle that one should love his fellow as himself with the prohibition of speaking loshon hara (evil speech). This is to teach us that if one loves his fellow as himself, he would not speak negatively about him.

The Torah tells us that when Yaakov fled to the home of Lavan (his uncle), he prayed to Hashem to protect him "ushmarani." The Yalkut tells us that Yaakov asked to be protected from, "Forbidden relationships, murder, idolatry, and loshon hara." One can understand Yaakov's request to be protected from the three cardinal sins, which are so serious; however, why does he simultaneously ask to be protected from loshon hara (speaking negatively about another individual without constructive value)? It would seem from Yaakov's request that he is equating loshon hara to the three cardinal sins. How do we understand this? The answer is - if one takes another person's life, it

is an indication that he does not value that person's existence; if one commits adultery, it is an indication that he does not value the exclusivity of the woman's relationship with her husband because he does not value the husband; if one worships idols, this is an indication that he only cares about himself and not G-d. When a person speaks loshon hara it is because he does not have any concern for the consequences of his negative statements vis-à-vis the person of whom he is speaking.

The victimization of an individual does not begin with murder or adultery, but rather with devaluing him. Loshon hara is the beginning of the process of minimizing another person's worth, which can ultimately lead to violating the cardinal sins. However, if one holds another in the same esteem as himself, then he would not speak negatively or want to victimize him in any way.

We need to reflect on our own behavior in order to understand and appreciate where we are. For example, if a person needs something to write on and uses a Torah book as a writing slate, this is an indication to what degree he lacks respect for the Torah itself. If a person truly valued the Torah, he could not use it in this manner. Another example is the way in which one unravels his tefillin. The straps have the same level of sanctity as the tefillin itself (the boxes and parchment). Thus, one should treat every aspect of the tefillin with respect.

As we see regarding the plague of hail, the Torah is teaching us that one will come to understand how to value something only when he sees the consequences.

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