

CLASS 36 - BO

by Rabbi Heshy Grossman

The narrative of the ten plagues is divided in two, with seven plagues described in Parshas VaEra, and the remaining three in the reading of this Shabbos, Parshas Bo.

This is not in order to keep the Parshios reasonably balanced, or vary the story line. The Makkos of Arbeh, Choshech, and Bechoros serve a particular function, one worthy of its own place.

In our shiur this week, we will explain the nature of these three plagues and their relevance for all time.

1

The ten plagues parallel the Asarah Ma'amaros, the ten utterances with which the world is brought to existence, and both of these correspond to the Aseres HaDibros.

The ten utterances by which the world is created should be recognized by man as he ponders the physical universe. Man is obliged to reflect upon his surroundings, seeing the Hand of G-d as author of creation.

In Lashon HaKodesh, every item in existence is known as 'Davar' - a word, for all of life has something to say, testimony to the Divine influence that is the essence of its being.

When these words fail to be heard, and man ignores the spiritual message that nature hopes to impart, the universe is distorted in a physical mutation, and the word of G-d is transformed as ten plagues that ultimately teach the very same lessons.

"V'Nagaf Hashem Es Mitzraim Nagof V'Rafah....and G-d struck Egypt with a blow and cure...." (Isaiah 19:22)

"...a blow for Mitzraim and a cure for Yisrael" (Zohar)

While the plagues strike Egypt, crushing their powerful dynasty, and sending them to the trash heap of history, Klal Yisrael is cleansed of the impurities of exile, ready to approach the mountain of G-d. There they will accept the ten utterances in a new form, the ten commandments that cannot be denied.

The Makkos are not a new and exciting form of punishment, nor are they mere retribution. Each of the plagues strike at an idea that Mitzraim holds dear, demonstrating the emptiness and falsehood of a culture doomed to drown in the sea. The Bnai Yisrael take this lesson to heart, and the message

of Yetzias Mitzraim becomes a foundation of faith.

The Asarah Ma'amaros of creation leave room for denial. Man has the freedom to ignore the Divine message of the physical world, a lesson that is only indirectly carried through the wonders of nature.

The Aseres HaDibros on the other hand, are absolute commands which man contravenes only at his own peril, evident truths of a higher realm. Unlike the mysteries of the universe, these Mitzvos of Sinai are G-d's direct word, addressed to His people, the binding orders that sustains all existence.

The plagues begin at the bottom, steadily progressing towards the total destruction of Egypt's might and culture, culminating in Makkas Bechoros, the death of the best and the strongest.

At first, G-d's Hand strikes the river and the earth, showing Pharaoh and the world that this physical planet is in His total control.

The punishments reach the animal kingdom, and then towards the sky, and the power of Egypt begins to crumble.

As the outer shell of Egyptian influence is slowly peeled away, the eternal message of G-d sounds ever more clearly. Each of the plagues allow for another word to be heard, but in the opposite order. After the tenth plague, the death of Egypt's firstborn, with Mitzraim no more, Klal Yisrael discovers a Reishis of their own, "Breishis Bara Elokim", the first Ma'amar, and basis of all the rest.

The plague of darkness parallels the second Ma'amar - "Yehi Ohr" - "Let there be light". While the Egyptians are blinded with a darkness through which they cannot see, the B'nai Yisrael bask in a light that has long been hidden, the Ohr HaGanuz of earth's first day.

2

The third Ma'amar - "Yehi Rakia B'Soch HaMayim, V'Yehi Mavdil Bein Mayim L'Mayim" corresponds to the eighth plague, Makkas Arbeh, an equation which needs further explanation.

This Rakia separates earth's physical and spiritual dimensions, Heaven's image of the blue sky that fills our horizon. Ideally, man should utilize this Rakia in the quest to reach beyond his earthly confines, crossing the barrier that calls for him to always look higher and higher.

The Rakia exists within the heart of man, the obstacle that restrains him from spiritual heights. At the same time, it is the breaking of this physical bind that leads him to a deeper grasp of reality, and it is the yearning for spiritual growth that initiates this ascent.

Makkas Arbeh stands in total contrast.

What is the nature of Arbeh?

"Melech Ein Lo Arbeh, VaYetze Chotzetz Kulo" - "The locust have no king, they go out together en masse" (Mishlei 30:27)

The king is Achad HaAm, the single force merging his people into one cohesive unit, now unified in pursuit of a higher vision.

Locust have no king. With no direction, and no purpose, they emerge in a swarm, descending as one mass to devour all that they touch.

"And they covered the sight of the earth, and the land was dark...." (Shemos,10:15)

"The earth became dark because the Arbeh separated between the sun and the earth..." (Ibn Ezra, ad. loc.)

A new Rakia.

Supplanting the Rakia of creation, the Arbeh create a new sort of heaven, one which darkens the earth, allowing no light to pass through.

Let us explain.

Each individual on earth dwells in his own private world, with a unique Shamayim and Aretz. The root of the word Aretz is Ratz, or Ratzon, the will and desire that power his life. The goal that he endeavors to reach is the sum total of every Sham - over there, and for this reason, the word Shamayim can likewise be read as Shamim, a multiple of 'there'. In short, it is the desire, goals, purpose and direction of each person's inner world that define his own heaven and earth.

At times, man abandons this inner space, choosing to assimilate into the surrounding culture, losing sight of the unique identity that marks him as an individual with a mind of his own. His goals and aspirations become identical to those of everyone around him, and in unison they chant and cheer for the latest fad or frenzy.

In the environment of today, all of mankind wants the same thing. We all read the same books, see the same shows, laugh at the same jokes, and sing the same songs. Even those far-flung reaches of the planet which television has not yet conquered (if such a place still exists), and traditional values still hold sway, man still wants those very same things, hoping for the day when McDonald's will come to his town, too.

It is a global culture of uniformity, with all particular character traits conforming to societal norms. With no individualized goals or purpose, modern man has no need to look anywhere else for meaning and direction, having created a heaven of their own.

A number of years ago, I asked a student why he felt it necessary to leave Yeshiva for the day to attend a mass demonstration. Admitting that he was not politically oriented, nor particularly interested, he responded that he didn't want to miss the experience of being part of a crowd of many thousands.

"Why not a better idea", I suggested, "take a bus to Tel Aviv and get off near the Ayalon highway.

Then, stand there for a few hours and watch the thousands of cars stalled in rush-hour traffic. Don't you want to be part of the Israeli experience?"

In a society where night life is defined as an area where people congregate, and a party is given when varied individuals get drunk together, for no particular reason, it is little wonder that heaven has been displaced with the pursuit of pleasure for its own sake.

The vision of heaven has given way to the sounds of the multitude, the humming drone of an aimless swarm.

This is the locust plague of our generation, a society that never looks up.

3

"VaYomer Hashem El Moshe: Come to Phaarah, for I have hardened his heart and the heart of his servants, in order to place these signs in his midst."

"And in order to make the tale heard to your son and your grandson, how I have played with Mitzraim, and the signs that I have placed there, and you will know that I am Hashem."

Moshe is suddenly afraid to approach Phaarah, fearful that his obstinate refusal indicates a deeply rooted evil, one that is difficult to counter.

Hashem encourages Moshe to proceed without hesitation, assuring him that Phaarah's strength is merely artificial, propped up by G-d for reasons of His own. Egypt will become an example, a symbol of Divine justice, and a lesson for the ages.

Why is this teaching enacted only with Makkas Arbeh, and not before? Were not the previous plagues also manifestations of punishment and retribution? Why was Moshe not previously enjoined to relate this tale to the children?

The answer will explain our story's division - plagues of seven and three.

The natural world exists in multiples of seven, whether it be the days of the week, the cycle of the years, or the six sides of every three-dimensional item (and the connecting center).

This world can be taken in two ways. If understood correctly, the righteous man sees the word of G-d echoed throughout the physical universe, but, if man chooses to rebel against his Creator, the very same world can be used to bite the hand that feeds him.

The seven initial plagues strike at the Egyptian view of the physical world, a distorted misconception. While these Makkos reveal the mistake of a materialistic world view, they do not yet uncover a higher dimension, for they have merely erased a physical entity that in any case has little substance or staying power.

But, when Phaarah has the courage to persist, holding fast to his evil stance, Moshe fears a

confrontation with wickedness of a higher sort, an essence that will not change.

Hashem reveals this: There is no force that stands against Me; Phaaro'h's position is my own creation, sustaining Mitzraim in order to express My true strength, the supernatural revelation of 'Yehi Ohr' and 'Breishis Bara Elokim'.

This is the lesson of Parshas Bo - opening the heavens for the first and last time, bearing witness to a truth that forms the basis of faith.

The locust erase the physical barrier that holds back true illumination, and finally His people look up to heaven, seeing a message they will remember till the end of time.

"V'Higadeta L'Bincha BaYom HaHu L'Aimor: B'Avur Zeh Asah Hashem Li B'Tzeisi MiMitzraim"

"V'Hayah Lecha L'Os Al Yadecha, U'L'Zikaron Bein Einecha, L'Ma'an Tehiyeh Toras Hashem B'Picha Ki B'Yad Chazakah Hotziacha Hashem MiMitzraim."

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