

ALMOST MIDNIGHT...

by Rabbi Yaakov Menken

This week, the straw finally comes that breaks Pharaoh - he releases the children of Israel from Egypt, so that they can go out to worship G-d. Moshe comes before Pharaoh to warn him of the coming Tenth and Final Plague: "So says G-d: at just about midnight, I will go through Egypt...and every firstborn will die..." [11:4]

Moshe told Pharaoh that at "just about" midnight -- "KA"-chatzos Halaylah -- G-d will go through Egypt. We see later (12:29) that G-d actually went out "BA"-chatzi Halaylah, at midnight precisely -- and isn't it obvious that G-d is more accurate than Timex? Why would He not specify the exact time?

In the Talmud (Brachos 4a), the Rabbis explain that G-d did indeed say that the plague would come at midnight, and Moshe was responsible for the change. Moshe was afraid that Pharaoh's advisors would err in their calculation of midnight. Were they to make a mistake, thought Moshe, they would conclude that Moshe or G-d was a liar.

Now think about this for a moment -- is that not hard to believe? Moshe says that Ten Plagues are coming, and lo and behold each one comes about exactly as described. Ten unnatural disasters all testify that Moshe knows what he's talking about. So we come to the last one, the Grand Finale, the Plague to beat all Plagues... and according to the advisors' miscalculation it comes at 12:00:30. And from this, they determine that Moshe is a liar?

That is exactly what our Parsha says. This is the same Pharaoh we learned about last week, who, in the middle of an argument, reached the point that no new evidence would change his mind. It's a part of human nature that is difficult to fight, even when reality is literally staring us in the face. Moshe felt that Pharaoh's timekeepers were liable to overlook the obvious conclusion -- that they miscalculated -- in favor of the comfortable one -- Moshe was lying, and G-d has no control after all.

The proof comes later in the Parsha, when the plague of the firstborn actually takes place. In 12:29-30, we read that G-d went through Egypt at midnight, "and Pharaoh arose that night (etc.)." Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki explains that Pharaoh "arose" from his bed.

This, too, is unbelievable. After nine plagues were accurately described, Moshe announced that the 10th would involve the death of every firstborn, including Pharaoh's own son. Did Pharaoh release Israel? Did he at least worry? Did he sit by his son's bedside, concerned? No -- he went to sleep! Not only did Pharaoh refuse to accept reality... he wasn't even worried about it.

It is our duty, often, to avoid the same trap. Perhaps if we step back and look at a situation objectively, we will realize that we are making a mistake. And we might even see it before it's too late!

Good Shabbos,