

TORTURE NOT REQUIRED

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week's parsha, Va'eirah, contains the 'sign' that Moshe showed Paroah and the beginning of the plagues. Until this point, the result of Moshe's dealings with Paroah was a harshening of the enslavement. Last week we concluded with the words "Atah tir'eh (6:1)" - now, Hashem tells Moshe, you will see. As the Kli Yakar writes, the darkness is greatest before the first rays of morning. The severity of the oppression is indicative of the imminent redemption. Atah tir'eh - now you will see.

Many are troubled by the harsh punishment given to the Mitzrim (Egyptians). Wasn't it already decreed to Avrohom Avinu that his descendants would be enslaved in Mitzraim? If there was no free will on the part of the Mitzrim, then why should they be held accountable?! Don't we view the reward and punishment promised in the Torah as proof that we are free-willed beings? For if all was predetermined how could there justly be reward or punishment? Yet, it seems that the Mitzrim are being punished for an historical role that they had to play!

The Rambam (quoted by the Ramban Breishis 15:14) explains that although there was a collective decree on Mitzraim to enslave us, each individual retained his free will to participate in this enslavement. Being that all Mitzraim used their freewill and individually chose to participate, they each deserved punishment.

The Ramban disagrees with this. On the contrary, if there was a decree to enslave the Jews, then all those who took the initiative to fulfill this decree should be rewarded! They used their freewill to fulfill the command and will of Hashem! If a king instructs his subjects to perform a certain act, those who lazily push that responsibility upon others are punished. Those who rise to the occasion and perform this act are rewarded.

The Ramban explains that enslavement was decreed, torture was not. Their punishment was well deserved for their going far beyond their call of duty. Throwing our children into the Nile was annihilation - not enslavement. For that which was decreed they were not punished. Using their freewill to add agony to that decree is what brought on their punishment.

The Be'er Yosef uses this to explain another seeming difficulty. Hashem instructed Moshe that Aharon was to throw his staff onto the ground and "Y'hee l'sanin (7:9)" - it would turn into a snake. This sign would display to Paroah the ability of the One who sent them. Paroah, upon seeing this, summons his wise men and his sorcerers and they too throw down their staffs, transforming them into snakes. The Medrash adds that Paroah then summoned his wife and she too transformed her

staff into a snake. He then summoned school children, four and five year olds, and they too transformed their staffs into snakes. Ultimately, Aharon's returned to being a staff and then swallowed all of the Egyptian staffs.

Granted that a display of power was accomplished by Aharon's staff consuming theirs, but why was he initially instructed to perform that unconvincing and easily duplicated sign? What was Hashem teaching Paroah through this sign?

The Be'er Yosef explains that a staff merely transmits the force of the person wielding it. It doesn't add on any power of its own. A snake, however, adds on its own fury to the strength of its holder. Hashem was illustrating to Paroah the reason why he and his nation would be punished so severely. They were supposed to have performed the function of a staff in the Hand of Hashem. To enslave Bnei Yisroel to the exact degree that Hashem had decreed. They had instead acted as a snake - adding their own venomous poison. Aharon was instructed to throw the staff on the ground and have it turn into a snake. Show the Mitzrim that they had transformed themselves from a staff into a snake. Explain why they would suffer.

Paroah then had them all transform their staffs into snakes. As if to say that I know exactly what we've done and we will continue to do so! Our sorcery will do battle against your Hashem! Aharon's staff then consumed all of theirs. A clear precursor of the outcome. The Hand of Hashem will rule.

The second of the 'eser makos' (ten plagues) was tz'fardaya (frogs). Hashem commanded Moshe to instruct Aharon to extend his arm over the waters of Mitzraim. (The waters had saved Moshe as an infant and therefore it would have been a show of ingratitude for Moshe to have brought forth a plague from those very same waters.) "Vata'al ha'tz'fardaya vat'chas es Eretz Mitzraim (8:2)" - and the frog arose and covered the land of Mitzraim.

Why is tz'fardaya (frog) written in the singular? Rashi quotes from the Medrash that the plague began with one large frog. Whenever the Mitzrim hit it, streams of frogs came pouring out of it. Ultimately, so many frogs came out that the whole land of Mitzraim was covered.

The Steipler asks the very obvious question. Once the Mitzrim saw that each hit brought forth more frogs, why didn't they stop hitting it!? I'd ask them the same question I asked my five year old son when he dove head first off of his bunk bed... What were you thinking!? The Steipler explains that they became furious when they saw the large frog spewing more frogs... They couldn't control their anger and frustration... They hit it again... It spewed more frogs... They got even angrier... They hit it again... It spewed more... And again... It spewed more... And again... And again... "Va't'chas es Eretz Mitzraim" - The whole land of Mitzraim was covered with frogs.

When we're angry we act in a counterproductive and self destructive manner. If someone acts belligerently toward us our automatic response is to respond with anger. Stop! Think. If we'll stay

silent, the other person would gradually cool down. Our angry response will simply fuel the fire further. Counterproductive. Self destructive. Think. Plan out the proper response - if any. Act on impulse - va't'chas es Eretz Mitzraim. The whole land of Mitzraim will be covered with frogs.

Often, the key is to try to understand the true underlying cause of the other person's anger. A beautiful story is told in the book entitled Around the Magid's Table. In the Yeshiva of Novardok there were no dormitory facilities. Students would rent rooms near the Yeshiva. One building, where more than twenty rooms were rented, was owned by a bitter angry widow who lived with her young son. She would always shout at and insult her student tenants. At times she would turn off the water. At other times, she would stop the electricity. Slowly, the boys began moving out. The convenience of close housing wasn't worth the trouble with the landlord. Although her income suffered greatly, she continued her harangues. Eventually, only one boy remained.

One day, as he was returning home, she saw him from a distance and started yelling. "You must be crazy! Why are you staying? Everybody else moved out - why don't you join them?"

The student paused and answered softly, "I stay for your sake. I understand that when you yell you're merely letting out your frustrations about being widowed and struggling to support yourself and your son. I fear that one day you might need some help. That's why I stay."

The woman's face turned ashen. The woman who had looked so harsh and angry suddenly looked crestfallen and vulnerable. "Forgive me, forgive me please. How kind and gracious of you." For days, she only had kind words for the boys she met. Word got around that she had changed and boys began to move back into her rooms.

Often, if we have a chance to prepare ourselves then we can act properly. The problem is when we're taken by surprise. My parents had been in Israel and were preparing for their return flight to the States. I went to Yerushalayim to help them with their heavy suitcases. We brought them out to the street and were enjoying each others company while waiting for the taxi to take them to the airport. The serenity was shattered when the taxi arrived a bit late and the driver came out yelling. "Hurry up , we're late!" He then eyed their average sized suitcases and started to yell that they were too big and he wouldn't have room. At that point I frankly 'lost it'. I started to shout at him that he has no right to treat people like that. If he's running an airport service he has to expect people to have suitcases and he must have enough room. At that point he began to very graphically state his opinion about Ciners of generations past. I finally got the suitcases in and my parents seated in the cab. We said our goodbyes and they drove off.

Needless to say, on my way home I felt terrible. I couldn't believe that I'd allowed myself to be dragged down to his level. I couldn't believe that, until their next visit, my parents last memory of their son, the rabbi, was watching him have it out with a cab driver. I realized that I had been caught unaware. I decided to think through what I should have done and be ready should such a situation arise again. I resolved that I never should have said a word to the driver. I should have turned to my

parents and said, loud enough for him to hear, "He must have had a long hard day. Let me help load the suitcases to make it a bit easier for him." At best he'd have seen that I was giving him the benefit of the doubt and he'd have calmed down. At worst, he'd have continued his ranting but without my making it a duet. I'd have had a dignified and proper parting with my parents.

Little did I realize that my opportunity to put this into practice would come just a few weeks later. I was late night shopping at a supermarket known for its cheap prices and tense, overcrowded aisles. As I was squeezing my cart past another, my cart snagged the bottom bag of a pile pulling it and all of its compatriots onto the floor. A harried worker sitting a few feet away from had just finished stacking those bags. He too felt the need to graphically discuss my family lineage as he vented his anger. My initial reaction was anger at the abuse... I remembered my friend the cab driver... As I apologized and began to help collect the bags, I turned to the person next to me and said, "I really feel terrible. I'm sure he's been working since early this morning and he must be exhausted. How frustrating to watch someone knock down what you just arranged."

I didn't know if he understood English but I walked away feeling proud of the way I had handled myself. A short while later, I approached a store worker inquiring where I could locate a certain item. This original worker, seeing that I needed some help, came running over and, in English, asked how he could help me. He then proceeded to follow me around just in case I might need some help! He was so grateful to me for seeing past his outburst, giving him the benefit of the doubt and treating him like a human being.

Stop. Think. When possible - be prepared.

Wishing you a wonderful Shabbos,

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