

WHEN SWEET TASTES BITTER

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we read the parsha of Bo. "Bo el Paroah [Go to Paroah][10:1]" and warn him.

The Sforno explains that Moshe was hesitant about returning to Paroah and warning him. What purpose would it serve? Hadn't Paroah already exclaimed after the plague of hail: "Hashem is the tzaddik [righteous] and I and my nation are r'sha'im [evildoers]! [9:27]" and yet, he still refused to send out Bnei Yisroel? Hashem explained to Moshe that the purpose of the plagues is not, at this point, to convince Paroah to free Bnei Yisroel. Rather, I want to show My wondrous signs in Mitzrayim [Egypt] in order that Bnei Yisroel will tell all of their future generations and they will recognize My greatness. Therefore, go and warn him even though he won't heed the warning.

The ninth plague visited upon Mitzrayim was darkness. "And Hashem said to Moshe: 'Extend your hand on the heavens and there will be darkness on the land of Mitzrayim, and the darkness will be felt.' And Moshe extended his hand on the heavens and there was great darkness on Mitzrayim for three days... And for all Bnei Yisroel there was light. [10:21-23]"

The darkness brought onto Mitzrayim was not simply an absence of light. It was a tangible essence of darkness. Where does such darkness come from? The Medrash explains that this darkness came from the 'darkness of above'.

What is meant by this 'darkness of above'? Aren't the heavens filled with the pure, clear light of clarity and truth? Furthermore, the Nesivos Sholom asks, why was Moshe told to extend his hand on the heavens? Wouldn't it make more sense that he be commanded to extend his hand toward the heavens?

He explains that Hashem commanded Moshe to extend his hand and thereby bring down onto Mitzrayim a spiritual entity whose true place was 'on the heavens'. Bring down that pure light of above, that light of 'on the heavens', and its presence will cause an incredible, tangible darkness for Mitzrayim!

The Rambam writes that as the physically ill taste sweet as bitter and bitter as sweet, so too the spiritually ill enjoy false notions and abhor the true and good path. This pure light, as perceived by the Egyptians steeped in their denial of Hashem and His power, was seen as darkness. However, "... And for all Bnei Yisroel there was light!"

I recall many years (eons?) ago attending a concert at Madison Square Garden. I was sitting in the

seventh row center in front of the stage. The music was so loud I was unable to hear it. I could only make out which song was being played by covering both ears with my hands. After about ten minutes I had been sufficiently deafened to be able to enjoy the rest of the show without needing to cover my ears. (I thereby avoided going home with aching arms in addition to my aching ears.) However, until that point, the music was so loud that it could not be heard...

The brightest light that we encounter is the sun. Its light is so intense for the human eye, that by looking at it we become temporarily blinded. We only see darkness...

That is what was meant by the 'darkness of above'. The heavens are filled with the pure, clear light of clarity and truth. But that brilliant light, for the eye that is not prepared for it, is blinding. It is seen as darkness. Not an absence of light but a tangible darkness that obliterates all.

With this we can understand that the Jews who didn't want to leave Mitzrayim died during this plague of darkness. For those with the potential to see this pure light who instead chose impurity, for them it wasn't simply darkness, it was death.

Rashi adds that they died during the days of darkness in order that the Egyptians wouldn't see them dying and say the Jews were also getting hit like them.

What a glaring example of having clarity before you and choosing to deny it. Choosing darkness. To date, eight plagues had been brought upon them, precisely as Moshe had foretold each time. Mitzrayim was in ruins. The ninth plague is now upon them. They are entrapped in darkness while there is light for the Jews. However, some Jews died! How would that be interpreted by their desperate minds? You see! There really is no G-d! All that has happened so far has not been Hashem punishing us for torturing His nation. It hasn't been His Hand smacking us until we'll finally release His children. The past nine months will be ignored because Jews also died during this ninth plague. Incredible. The darkness that a person can see in the midst of such blinding light.

An even more glaring example of this is found by the tenth plague, makkas b'choros [the deaths of the firstborn children]. The Talmud [Berachos 4B] teaches that Hashem told Moshe that the deaths would occur b'chatzos -- precisely at midnight. Yet, when Moshe relayed the warning to Paroah, he said kachatzos -- around midnight [11:4].

Why didn't Moshe relay to Paroah as Hashem had told him? The Talmud explains that Moshe was afraid. Of course Hashem would bring the plague precisely at midnight, not a millisecond earlier or later. But, perhaps the Egyptian astrologers would make an error in their calculations and they would mistakenly think that the deaths of their firstborn didn't occur at midnight. They'd think it actually occurred at either 11:59:59.999 or at 12:00:00.001. They would then claim that Moshe was a liar!

Incredible! Ten for ten accuracy during the time of the plagues. Every single Egyptian firstborn has died. Not a single Jew has been harmed. But, since (according to their miscalculation) it didn't happen precisely at midnight as Moshe had said it would, that shows that everything they've

experienced until now has been a sham. Moshe is a sham. Hashem is a sham. It's all been a sham.

The thick, tangible darkness that can be perceived in the place of such absolute clarity...

May we be blessed with the state of the Jews during the plague of darkness, that "For all Bnei Yisroel there was light." To see the dizzying light of Hashem's presence all around, even while the rest of the world may be steeped in darkness...

Good Shabbos,

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