

WAKE UP AND SEE THE ALEPH

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

According to the Pri Tzadik, every plague inflicted upon the Egyptian people was simultaneously a spiritual elixir for the Jewish nation. The ten plagues helped them climb from the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity to at least "neutral ground" by the time they were supposed to leave Egypt. Each plague was an even greater revelation of the hand of G-d than the one that preceded it, which greatly impacted the belief of the Jewish people who witnessed the methodical decimation of the Egyptian Empire.

A lot can, and has been said about each of the ten plagues, which mirrored the ten statements (in reverse) that Hashem used to make creation. However, analyzing even the first plague is enough to extract from the redemption from Egypt the principle message intended for Jews throughout all the generations.

Why blood?

It is well known that the word "adam" (man, pronounced a-dumm) is made up of two parts, alluding to the essence of man's make-up: (flesh and) blood (Hebrew: dumm), and the letter "aleph," which always stands for G-d, or G'dliness, or in this case, the soul. Hence man (adam) is the combination of body and soul, physicality and spirituality-the former symbolized by blood, and the latter, by the soul.

The message of the first plague is as follows: If one pursues a non-spiritual course in life, ignoring the moral imperative to develop one's self, and then the world around him, then, in a sense, it is as if he has severed the "aleph" from the "dum." The water, which always symbolizes life, turned into blood in order to indicate just how non-spiritual Egypt had become (the Nile river was its principle god).

The manifestation of this negative reality is a sense of "bliss" from pursuing a wholly secular lifestyle. According to the Nefesh HaChaim, the greatest punishment a person can suffer in this world for ignoring G-d is a lack of sense of his own soul, because this denies a person the possibility to grow in real terms. In a physical sense, this is similar to a person who loses his sense of touch, which denies him the possibility of knowing when what he is doing (such as putting his hand on a hot element) is damaging him. He may feel nothing at the time, and even blissful, but in the meantime, his skin is melting-permanently.

The "punishment," so-to-speak, for pursuing an "Egyptian" lifestyle need not be a sense of suffering

now; it may simply be the inability to see past the wantonness and futility of that lifestyle, closing the door on the chance of doing tshuva, as was the case with Paroah and the Egyptian people.

Therefore, the first plague to strike against the Egyptian people, in order to wake the Jewish people up to where they were holding spiritually, was the plague of blood. It was as if to say, "Look at yourselves! Are you Egyptians, or children of Avraham, Yitzchak, and Ya'akov? Where's the 'aleph' from your name? Where's your sense of G-dliness, your sense of spirituality, your inherited drive to grow spiritually?" The fact that all Egyptian water turned to blood, while Jewish water remained pure, strongly indicated the inherent spiritual potential of each Jew to become and live as an "adam."

To realize this signalled the beginning of the redemption for the individual. For, the word "geulah" (redemption) is equal numerically in gematria to the word "adam" (45). And if the "aleph" is removed from "geulah," it spells the word "golah," the term used to refer to someone who is in exile. Hence, "golah" and "dum" are also equal numerically (44).

This is also a reason why the blood had to be sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel the night the Jews celebrated the first Pesach, while the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn was taking place outside throughout Egypt. It was the blood that signalled to the Angel of Destruction not harm anyone in the home, because it revealed the family's commitment to rise above physicality and to become an "adam" in the true sense of the term.

Having stated this, it is possible to appreciate why the Haggadah implores each Jew to look at himself as if he too left Egypt, even thousands of years after the actual redemption took place. Exile and redemption are relative terms, just as spirituality is a relative term. To the extent that one pursues a moral lifestyle defined by the Torah and elucidated by the rabbis, is to the extent one has "built-up" the "aleph" and attached it to the "dum"; i.e., it is the extent to which he has become an "adam." Our physical reality is pretty much a given from birth; our spiritual reality is within our hands to build up, or, G-d forbid, destroy. Exile can be bliss, sometimes (four-fifths of the Jewish population chose to remain behind in Egypt), but, eventually, the bliss ends in utter despair (they died during the plague of darkness), often when it is too late to reverse the trend.

Thus the plague of blood, and all the subsequent plagues that followed, made the point perfectly clear for the one who wished to learn it: It is only the true and complete "adam" that experiences "geulah," and all the blessings that come with it.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

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