

MOVING OUT AND UP

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

There are two kinds of reality, G-d's and man's. G-d's reality is large "R" reality, and man's is small "r" reality. G-d's version of reality is absolute, a perfection expression of His plan for creation, whereas man's version of reality, developed from the moment he is born, is temporary, always changing, and often mistaken. The point of life is for the individual to try to make his vision of reality match G-d's, after which he will be able to see creation and all aspects of it from G-d's point of view, so-to-speak. This is the goal of learning Torah; sin, any sin, is the result of a mistaken perspective, as the Talmud states:

No person sins until a spirit of insanity enters him. (Sota 3a)

Insanity here means out of touch with reality-G-d's reality.

Paroah and all of Egypt lived an illusion. When Moshe came to see Paroah and demand the freedom of the Jewish people, Paroah probably said:

"Moshe, you have to be kidding. Look around you. Don't you see who's in control here? Don't you see who commands the largest, most powerful army in the world? Don't you find it strange to come in here, and from a position of weakness demand the undemandable ... to free your people, our slaves? You're lucky I don't kill you on the spot for even suggesting the possibility!"

At that point, when Paroah asked, "Who is G-d that I should free this nation?" he felt on top of the world. Everything had, up until then, gone his way. He was a success. He was the leader of the superpower of that time. As far as Paroah was concerned, you couldn't be any freer than he was, and any less free than the nation Moshe was now championing.

The ten plagues, and the miracles they presented was none other than the imposition of G-d's reality onto Paroah's. That's all a miracle ever is: G-d's revelation about what He thinks about history and its players. And as Large R reality made itself ever more perceivable, the master-slave situation flip-flopped. In the end, it was Paroah who went out in the middle of the night (in his pajamas no less ... how humiliating!) in search of Moshe to beg him and the Jewish nation to leave Egypt. In the end, Paroah's version of reality yielded to G-d's version of reality, as Moshe had predicted it would.

But make no mistake about it-all of us have a little of Paroah inside. It is the side of us that tends to

dream a bit, and give us the impression that what we do is exactly what G-d wants, and exactly the way He wants it done. The daily cheshbon hanefesh (accounting of one's life) suggested by the Mesillos Yesharim was designed to check this and keep us with at least one foot in G-d's reality.

Therefore, Paroah's question is our question at our worse moments. And G-d's answer back to Paroah is also His answer back to us, to some degree, except that, unlike Paroah, most of us have the chance to do tshuva (repent). Tshuva means realigning our version of reality with G-d's. This is what it really means to be free, for nothing can be more enslaving than living a lie; nothing can be more debilitating than pretending a false dream is in fact reality. And though we may get away with it for now, eventually G-d's reality wins out. It always does.

Shabbos Day:

It is no coincidence that the ten plagues are divided into two groups, one of seven and one of three. According to the Pri Tzaddik, this corresponds to the seven lower sefiros (from the bottom up: Malchus, Yesod, Hod, Netzach, Tifferes, Gevurah, and Chesed; in English: Kingship, Foundation, Glory, Eternity, Beauty, Strength, and Kindness). The last three plagues correspond to the top three sefiros, (from the top down: Keser, Chochmah, and Binah; English: Crown, Wisdom, and Understanding).

Why the correlation? Because, as in the case with everything in history, there are two sides to the story that work in tandem with each other, one visible to the eye, and one hidden from the eye. We take for granted that G-d interfaces with history, "jumping in" and out at will. However, G-d Himself is not physical in the least, and the physical world as we know it is barely spiritual. Therefore, there must be some kind of mechanism that translates G-d's entirely spiritual will into some form of physical manifestation that we can recognize, such as the ten plagues.

The ten sefiros act this way. They are a spiritual medium that get increasingly more physical as they move "away" from G-d, acting as a chain of sorts to allow the will of G-d to result in some form of physical existence. What we see and experience is the end of a very long and remarkable process that begins in a totally sublime and esoteric world, and ends up in the mundane world of everyday existence.

As the plagues began, the Jewish people had been on the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity after being in Egypt for 209 years. Preparing them to leave Egypt meant elevating them from the depths of defilement to at least some kind of spiritual neutral ground. The first seven plagues began that process because they correspond to the seven days of physical creation, and therefore are more "physically" oriented.

However, after having done this, the Jewish people were in a better position to go beyond the physical world, and into the realm of the upper three sefiros. This is why it is within this parsha of these three plagues that the Jewish people finally received mitzvos to fulfill. Having completed the first process of spiritual purification, they were better prepared to receive the light of mitzvos, and to be elevated by it.

As well, the rabbis point out that the ten plagues correspond to the ten statements with which G-d created the world, except in reverse (i.e., the first plague corresponds to the tenth statement, the second plague to the ninth statement of creation, and so on).

Confusing? Perhaps, but one point becomes clear: what we see in the physical world is not the beginning of the story, but the end of it. Just like a physical illness is indicative of some kind of health breakdown within the body, invisible to the naked eye, so too are the physical symptoms of history just an outer manifestation of what has occurred, is occurring, and will occur in the spiritual realm.

In other words, for all we know, as I write this paper and you read it, Moshiach may be sitting in some Bais Medrash in Israel learning Torah, just waiting for the call from Heaven to get the final redemption into full swing! According to the rabbis, redemption, when it finally appears, comes at the wink of an eye because the preparation for it has been occurring behind the scenes for generations, closed off to all but the trained eye. It is something to think about when looking out the window of one's skyscraper office window down upon the overly-active and spiritually-distanced world below, or in the quiet space of one's private world.

This too is a very important message of redemption from Egypt, and the Pesach Seder.

Seudos Shlishi:

Seeing that the mitzvah of Rosh Chodesh appears first in this week's parsha, and that this week was Rosh Chodesh Shevat, it seems only fitting to speak a bit about Rosh Chodesh itself.

In the Shulchan Aruch, Rosh Chodesh is not simply the first day of the new Jewish month. There is a mitzvah to eat special meals, and many dress somewhat nicer than on a regular weekday. Many women are strict to observe Rosh Chodesh as a mini-holiday, abstaining from some household chores for the day (or two when Rosh Chodesh is two days long).

Last year I mentioned how Rosh Chodesh is one mitzvah that really defines Jewish responsibility, which is why it was the first mitzvah to be given to us in Egypt. Just as the moon reflects the light of the sun, so too are the Jewish people to reflect the light of G-d to the world around them. This is the deeper meaning of being a "light unto the nations." It was to fulfill this mission that G-d turned history upside down to free us from the oppression of the Egyptians.

However, as one would expect, there is more to this mitzvah than meets the eye. After all, it is a holiday given over to the women because they didn't participate in the sin of the golden calf. What connection is there between the day of Rosh Chodesh and the golden calf?

First of all, as the rabbis point out, the word "chodesh" means new (the word for year, "shannah" means "change"). There is a renewal that is supposed to take place every month; a feeling of tshuva is supposed to sweep the nation. That is why the day before Rosh Chodesh, traditionally, we have observed what is appropriately called "Yom Kippur Katan" (a small Yom Kippur) to prepare for this heightened spiritual atmosphere.

What was the concept behind the golden calf? The calf represented youthfulness, the period of life during which we are free of responsibility and without need to change (or at least we feel that way). Maturation is the process by which we take more responsibility for our own lives, and accept the need to be (positively) critized for the sake of changing for the better. Gold represents eternity, so the golden calf represented the desire to forever stay changeless-the opposite of Rosh Chodesh.

When the women didn't participate in the sin of the golden calf, it was out of protest for what it stood for (aside from the fact that it was idol worship). The woman of that generation understood and appreciated the need to constantly grow spiritually, and rejected the subtle trappings of the calf. For this they were rewarded with the holiday of Rosh Chodesh, which defines our nation's mission and underlying commitment to forever work on spiritual growth.

Melave Malkah:

With Parashas Shemos, we entered a period called "Shov'vim," a word made up of six letters corresponding to the first letters of the first six parshios of Shemos: Shemos, VaAirah, Bo, BeShallach, Yisro, and Mishpatim (shin, vav, bais, bais, yud, mem). It actually spells a word that means "wayward ones," and alludes to a special opportunity to do tshuva at this time of the year.

Why now and not at Rosh Hashanah?

The difference between this period and the period of Rosh Hashanah/Yom Kippur is that at that time, the nation repents out of fear (specifically because of the fear of punishment since it is a time of strict judgment). However, from the parsha of Shemos onward, corresponding to this time of year, G-d increasingly emanates His holy light onto creation, which tends to fill the world with a heightened awareness of His existence and love for us. This process will reach a climax on Tu B'Shevat (which we will discuss next week, G-d willing), an even higher one on Purim, and the highest climax of all on Seder Night.

The result of this light is supposed to be a yearning in the heart of the spiritually-sensitive Jew to do

tshuva out of love, not fear, a higher form of tshuva. This is why we read the book, "Shir HaShirim" (Song of Songs) on Pesach, which is a metaphor for the intense love-relationship between G-d and the Jewish people.

We should merit to become fitting "vessels" for this special light, and the personal and national freedom that it brings. We should merit to forever grow spiritually, which will transform us into the "light unto the nations" we were redeemed to become, and witness the final redemption in our day.

Have a great Shabbos.

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