

CONCEPTION AND PERCEPTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d told Moshe, *"Tell the Children of Israel that if a woman conceives and gives birth to a male, then she will be ritually unclean for seven days . . ."* (Vayikra 12:1-2)

Birth is an amazingly deceiving aspect of life. True, we acknowledge the phenomenon by referring to it as the "Miracle of Birth." But, when you get right down to it, most treat it as quite a mundane event. How many children are born on a momentary basis again?

I once asked a doctor what it was like to deliver a baby. He told me that the first couple of times it was truly remarkable, but that after several times, he resented being paged for a birth. "Any doctor can do this," he told himself while responding to the call of birthing duty. I bet if the Red Sea were to split once a week, it would only be a camping site today. That would be something to see and experience while taking in the great outdoors and a barbeque.

But then again, if we can take the miracle of life for granted, then why shouldn't we be able to take the miracle of its start for granted as well? Indeed, while we're busy asking, "Why do we get sick?" we ought to be asking instead "Why we don't get sick more often?" given the billions of small and large things that could and should go wrong in our remarkable but seemingly fragile yet resilient bodies. It's amazing we even get better after becoming ill.

The gift of life is one of G-d's greatest calling cards, so if people are not impressed, it is no wonder they don't give Him a call.

Though Pesach is long gone by now, its messages are meant to stay with us all year round. For example, it has been pointed out that the only plague out of the ten that were inflicted upon the Egyptians to actually be called makkat (the plague of) is the Plague of the Firstborn (Makkas Bechoros). The rest of the plagues are usually referred to as Dumm (blood), Tzfardayah (Frogs), Kinnim (Lice), etc., with the word "makkat" before it. Why the difference?

The difference is that each of the first nine plagues were not performed directly by G-d Himself, as the Haggadah points out by the Tenth Plague. Only the Plague of the Firstborn was performed by G-d Himself, as it says, "I, and not an angel, etc."

The moment G-d inserts an intermediary into the chain of events to execute His will, an element of Hester Panim is added to history; the more intermediaries that are added, the more Hester Panim

there will be. Or, in everyday life terminology, the more "natural" the occurrence will appear to man; the less miraculous the miracle will seem to onlookers.

Thus, the first nine plagues, as miraculous as they were-and each subsequent plague was more miraculous than its predecessor-there was always an element of "Nature" involved, just enough to leave room for rationalization that G-d was not involved. This was so G-d could systematically punish Egypt and their gods, spiritually enhance the Jews who anticipated redemption, while leaving room for free-will choice, the purpose of Creation.

In fact, the scientist Immanuel Velikovsky, while researching the possible reality of the Exodus from Egypt (he hadn't believed in it previously, but found it harder to believe that if it did indeed happen, that no concrete evidence remained to verify the Jewish account), stumbled upon a papyrus in the Netherlands that gave an account, from the vantage point of an Egyptian of that time, that sounds very much like the Ten Plagues. However, it does not mention anything about the Jews or their G-d being responsible for them, though the dating of the papyrus coincides with the purported date of Yetzias Mitzrayim.

It is a great reminder of a very important point: the Torah's account of history is through the eyes of G-d, telling us what really happened according to His will. Man's account of history is from his OWN perspective telling us what he THINKS happened based upon his perception, his assumptions, and his opinions. After all, did every Egyptian at the time know what was transpiring between Pharaoh and Moshe, especially if he lived very far from the palace, and the Internet and the Eleven O'clock News had yet to be created? Thus, both accounts can talk about the exact same events, and yet appear so different due to the very different understandings of what occurred and why.

SHABBOS DAY:

G-d said to Moshe, *"Come to Pharaoh. I have allowed him to be stub- born, as well as his servants, in order to perform My signs among them, so you can relate it to your son, and your son's son, how I mocked Egypt, and about the signs I performed among them, so you will know that I am G- d."* (Shemos 10:1-2)

However, since G-d Himself carried out the Tenth Plague by personally (which is what "makkat" implies) killing the firstborn sons of all peoples in Egypt, except for those of the Jewish people, both vantage points merged. Thus, even Pharaoh was forced to acknowledge the truth, go looking for Moshe and begging him in the middle of the night, and finally submit himself to the demands of G-d. There was no possibility of free-will choice on this level of Divine revelation.

This is why four-fifths of the Jewish people died in the ninth plague, the Plague of Darkness. They had rejected the signs of redemption until that point, choosing instead to remain in Egypt in spite of Moshe's pleas to the contrary. They had rationalized the previous eight plagues making it possible to ignore the conclusion at which a Jew was supposed to have arrived at in order to go out, and therefore they lost the right to leave and to bear witness to the level of revelation of the Tenth

Plague. Therefore, they were quietly taken from the world during the Plague of Darkness.

This is the essential difference between the Wise Son in the Haggadah, and the Evil Son. In fact, the entire Haggadah comes down to this comparison, and this is hinted to in the response to the Evil Son: "Had you been there, you would not have gone out!" Then what would have happened to him? Well, there were only two possibilities: redemption, or death in the Plague of Darkness. This means that whatever it was that was plaguing the Evil Son, it was identical to that which brought down four-fifths (FOUR- FIFTHS!) of the Jewish people: a personally chosen inability to see the hand of G-d in the events of the day. This is why, unlike the Chacham, the Rasha leaves the Name of G-d out of his question, which is really a statement, and not a question, of disbelief.

On another level, the Chacham is matzah, the Rasha, chometz. Both represent visions of a single reality, except that a matzah point of view is pure and unadulterated-a G-dly point of view-whereas a chometz point of view is a bloated one, filled with all kinds of personal biases and opinions that color his final perception.

So we break the teeth of the Rasha in response to his denial of truth, for the gematria of shayn (tooth) is that of seichel (intelligence), and they both function the same way. For, just as the mind takes raw ideas and "chews" them so they can be more readily "digested," so too do the teeth take food and break it down for digestion. The Rasha simply does not want to penetrate the surface of reality and find the hand of G-d inside of it; instead he sets up shop in the world of Pshat in order to justify a spiritually simple (read: vacant) way of life.

Ultimately, he chooses to ignore the supernatural reality of the Jewish people to justify a more "natural" way of life, and that is why anything that even hints at the supernatural, such as the Korban Pesach, has no meaning for him.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

I will establish My covenant between Me and you, and with your descendants after you throughout the generations, an eternal covenant to you and your descendants I will be G-d. (Bereishis 17:7)

There are a few concepts that are central, and therefore as elucidated, such as Bris Milah, "cut" with thirteen covenants (Shabbos 132a). And, it becomes increasingly profound as one moves from the level of Pshat to the level of Sod, especially in this sixth and final millennium that corresponds to the sefirah of Yesod, and Bris Milah.

However, sometimes there is great profundity even on a simple level. After all, Bris Milah is not merely the "entrance fee" of a Jewish male into the Jewish people, it is a celebration of life, or better yet, a celebration of the MIRACLE of life. Thus, it occurs on the eighth day and not the seventh or ninth day, the number that always alludes to the supernatural. It's as if to say, "This baby, like all babies, is the result of a direct miracle!"

The truth is, the creation of a human being is unique in history, for it is the result of a complex

process that includes contributions from intermediaries and from G-d Himself, directly:

Our Rabbis taught: There are three partners in man, The Holy One, Blessed is He, his father, and his mother. His father supplies the white substance out of which are formed the child's bones, sinews, nails, the brain in his head and the white in his eye; his mother supplies the red substance out of which is formed his skin, flesh, hair, blood and the black of his eye; and The Holy One, Blessed is He, gives him the spirit and the breath, beauty of features, eyesight, the power of hearing and the ability to speak and to walk, understanding and discernment. When his time to depart from the world approaches, The Holy One, Blessed is He, takes away His share and leaves the shares of his father and his mother with him. (Niddah 31a)

Hence, part of birth and life actually results in Hester Panim (the physical part), and the part that is a direct revelation of G-d: the soul. Thus, to believe in the soul is to see the hand of G-d in life, and that is precisely what Bris Milah comes to remind us: the physical body is just clothing for the spiritual essence of a human being - the soul.

Therefore, the first plague in Egypt was that of blood. For, more than being devices for the destruction of Egypt, the plagues were tools to spiritually elevate the Jewish people, the other side of the same coin. Increase Jewish spiritually and automatically spiritual impurity diminishes to the point of non-existence, as was the case on the night the Jewish people made their first Pesach back in Egypt.

Blood symbolizes the physicality of man, and therefore it is the last two letters of the word adam - man: Dalet-Mem. The Aleph of "adam" alludes to the soul of man, which, just prior to the first plague had all but disappeared. This is what it means to be living on the forty-ninth level of spiritual impurity, which is what the Plague of Blood reflected to the Jewish people, hence elevating them while at the same time weakening the Egyptian people.

And, it is what the blood of Bris Milah reflects to us on the eighth day of a male child's life. The blood, like the body itself, comes and goes, but it is the soul that lives on forever. There is no taking even a single aspect of life for granted with that kind of perspective, not life and certainly not the miracle of birth itself.

MELAVE MALKAH:

G-d told Moshe and Aharon, *"When a person has a blotch, a discoloration, or spot on his skin like the curse of leprosy, then he should be brought to Aharon the priest, or to one of his descendants."* (Vayikra 13:1)

This is one of the reasons why the laws of the Metzora follow on the heels of the laws of childbirth. Tzora'as is a purely spiritual matter, though it has a physical manifestation that is often called leprosy. However, if, G-d forbid, one contracted leprosy, he would require the assistance of a physician to deal with the illness; the Metzora, on the other hand, turns to a kohen for diagnosis and

assistance.

In a very real sense, tzora'as is the exact opposite of Bris Milah: rather than welcoming a Jew into the community as does Bris Milah, it sends him away from the community. Bris Milah comes to accentuate the spiritual element of being human, whereas the Metzora emphasizes the physical element by judging another and feeling justified in speaking loshon hara about him. Bris Milah is the "covenant of the word," while the Metzora broke that covenant by abusing the G-dly trait of speech.

And, whereas the blood of Bris Milah helped redeem us from Egypt, it is the mouth of the Metzora that puts him right back there. For, ultimately it is his lack of appreciation of life that allows him to speak so wantonly and not strive to reach higher spiritual plateaus. Whatever it was that prompted the Metzora to speak his loshon hara and to ignore the test he was given by G-d, it is the exact opposite of what Bris Milah teaches and promotes.

The final section of Parashas Metzora represents a closing of the circle of these two parshios, for they deal with the "substances" that gives physical life to the baby, as described by the previous quote as written above from the Talmud. The only thing is that rather than produce life, it goes to waste. From a Hashgochah Pratis point of view, that can only be the result of a non-Torah attitude towards the miracle of life.

The scary thing is that all of us are a composite of all four sons. Depending upon the issue, we can react as a Chacham, a Rasha, a Tam, or an Aino Yoda'ah L'Shoel. When we are unbiased and interested in truth we act like a Chacham, when we hit a snag in life that disrupts our sense of comfort, we tend to ignore the deeper meaning and the Divine Providence of the situation and resist change, like the Rasha. Sometimes we're just neutral like the Tam, and sometimes we're so out of the picture we can't even ask a question about the situation like the Aino Yoda'ah L'Shoel.

Where we go from there is our own personal choice. We can be like any of the four sons, but Pesach tried to push us in the direction of the Chacham. The Omer-Count is to refine our middos and "sift" the Rasha part out of us for good. These parshios teach us what goes wrong in life when we don't succeed. May we succeed, and become perfect containers capable of receiving and living by Torah.

Have a great Shabbos,
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