

"APPROXIMATELY" MIDNIGHT?

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

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"Approximately" Midnight?

When Moshe Rabbeinu announced the impending plague of the first born, he used the language that G-d will appear "at approximately midnight" (k'chatzos haLaylah) [Shemos 11:4]. Rash"i explains that Moshe did not want to be precise in his declaration, lest the advisers of Pharaoh err in their calculation and attribute their mistake to G-d's imprecision or Moshe's inability to be exact. This was before the days of clocks and certainly before the days of precise digital clocks. Telling time was an estimated calculation.

Would the Egyptians really say, "Moshe is a liar" - that "it really happened at 12:02"? Hadn't they experienced a series of nine plagues for over a year now? Hadn't Moshe Rabbeinu been correct and accurate every single time about every single detail? Moshe had an immaculate track record. Should we expect the advisers to call Moshe a liar if they believed that he was off by two minutes in predicting the plague of the first born?

The answer is that such is, in fact, human nature. Human nature is to nit-pick, to take an occurrence which should be inspiring to everyone who sees it, and to find fault. "His tie was crooked;" "His Tzitzis were sticking out;" "He used a grammatically inappropriate phrase." People can witness an Exodus from Egypt where G-d intervenes in history and lets the world know once and for all that He controls human destiny. But there are always the "naysayers" the nitpickers, the pundits, and the instant-analysis people who will say "but it was 12:02 and he said midnight!"

A person, a school, a shul [synagogue], or any other organization may accomplish wonderful things. However, a tremendous amount of worthwhile accomplishments can be neutralized with one little "but did you see the color of the newsletter they sent out this week?" Such trivialities! Such nitpicking! "But it was 12:02!" Such is human nature.

The Gemara [Sotah 9b] describes the order of the process by which the suspected wife who drinks

the Sotah water receives her punishment. The Ramban points out that this is the only example in all of Torah where a religious command is built around an implicit miracle. It is a miraculous thing. If the woman is guilty, as soon as she drinks the water she literally starts to fall apart.

The Gemara mentions that when the Kohen issues the warning to her, he must tell her precisely what will happen: "Her stomach will explode and her thigh will fall away" [Bamidbar 5:22]. If the Kohen would say it slightly differently -- for example, if he mentions her legs first and then her stomach (when in truth it happened in the reverse order) people would speak slanderously about the Sotah water. In other words, explains Rash"i, they would attribute the miraculous sickness to other causes -- not to the Sotah water.

Since when do women have a violent, unnatural physical reaction to drinking a glass of water? This was obviously a miraculous event. But if the Kohen uses the wrong sequence when he specifies the plague that will strike her, the "naysayers" will start with their skepticism. "Nothing miraculous happened. There was no miracle. It was not like he said it would be."

This is human nature. This is how we are influenced. This tendency destroys any chance of spiritual arousal and inspiration. That is why the Torah tells us "approximately midnight". Moshe Rabbeinu knew about the "naysayers", cynics and pundits who never let us become inspired about anything. Therefore, he said, "approximately midnight".

The Precision of G-d's Justice

The pasuk [verse] says, "Draw forth or buy for yourselves sheep..." [Shemos 12:21]. The Medrash explains why the Korban Pesach [Paschal offering] must be a sheep by citing a pasuk from Proverbs: "A level and balance scale are Ha-shem's" (Peles u'moznei mishpat l'Hashem) [Mishlei 16:11]. The Medrash continues by explaining that the Korban Pesach was an example of the precision of G-d's Justice. The pasuk in Tehillim [99:6] equates Moshe Rabbeinu and Shmuel HaNovi [the prophet]. Nonetheless, the Medrash points out a difference between Moshe and Shmuel. G-d treated Shmuel with more deference than He treated Moshe. When G-d spoke to Moshe, Moshe went to the Ohel Moed [Tent of Meeting]. But when G-d spoke to Shmuel, G-d came to Shmuel [Shmuel I 3:10].

Why? Because Moshe stayed in his place when he judged and whoever had a Torah dispute came to him [Shemos 18:13]. But Samuel went to the people to adjudicate their disputes [Shmuel I 7:16]. Shmuel was an itinerant Judge, going from county to county and from city to city dispensing justice to everyone, so that they should not be troubled to come to him. Therefore G-d gave Shmuel the honor of "I'll come to you". That is how precise G-d's Judgment is. When G-d hands out reward, so to speak, He doesn't miss dotting an i or crossing a t. G-d is precise to the letter.

This is also true regarding G-d's punishment. When the Jews were enslaved in Egypt, the Egyptians would go out into the forest and catch livestock and then come home and have meat for supper. The poor slaves had to watch this with their mouths watering. They ate stale bread while their masters ate meat.

G-d therefore incorporated into the punishment of the Egyptians that the Jews would eat sheep (which was the Egyptian Deity) as part of their deliverance. "I want you to know how it feels to have someone eat meat while you can not partake". Again we see the preciseness of G-d's Judgment. "The Rock, His actions are faithful" [Devorim 32:4].

We should never be faced with troubles, but we need to have bedrock faith in G-d's Justice. When we see before our eyes, Heaven Forbid, people with troubles; things that do not seem to make any sense; sickness; illness; all the terrible things that we see... We must remember the words of this Medrash. G-d's reward and His punishment are all precise. His Justice is perfect. Whether something is a punishment or designed for a future reward is something we cannot know, but we must know that there is a reason.

As difficult as it is at times for us to accept -- often we can not fathom how certain events can be just -- that is sometimes the trial of the Jew. We need to always be able to recite with conviction the verse "The Rock, his actions are faithful".

Sources and Personalities

Rash"i -- Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki (1040-1105); France.

Ramba"n -- Rabbi Moshe ben Nachman (1194-1270); Spain; Israel.

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