

THE STROKE OF "AROUND MIDNIGHT"

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape # 490, The Lefty and Tefillin. Good Shabbos!

The First Born Plague Was Set for the Stroke of "Around Midnight"

Prior to the plague of the first born, Moshe told Pharoah, "Thus says Hashem: 'At around midnight I will go out into the midst of Egypt.'" [Shmos 11:4]. Rashi comments on the expression "around midnight". Of course G-d can be precise. He does not need to approximate. Why then did He say "around midnight?" Rashi explains that the fear was that Pharoah's astrologers might err and think that G-d was late (or early) in arriving. They might have come to the conclusion that the prophecy was imprecise. They would have accused Moshe of being a liar.

Moshe had been predicting the arrival of the plagues for over a year. He had been calling exactly what had happened. He had been right every time. Now this was the final plague. So what if he said "midnight" and the astrologers thought that the plague began a little before or a little after exact midnight? Would they have been any less impressed with the track record of Moshe? Would that be a justification to call him a liar? Look at his track record! He was right the whole time. Would they call him a liar just because he was two minutes off on plague number ten?

In past years when discussing this question, we have pointed out that this in fact is the nature and power of cynicism (laytzanus) -- to find any minute flaw and to build it up into a flaw of major proportions.

Recently, I saw a different approach from Rav Elya Meir Bloch, zt"l. We are not worried about cynics. We are worried about the Honor of Heaven. If G-d said that he would be there at midnight and people were waiting and thinking that it was already midnight, that would be a Chillul HaShem [a desecration of G-d's Name], albeit one that lasted perhaps only one minute.

We cannot tolerate a Chillul HaShem even for one minute. This can be compared to someone who was accused falsely in the morning edition of the paper. A retraction was planned for the next day's morning edition. The person who was falsely accused will not want to wait until the next day. He will

want a retraction printed in the afternoon edition. Not only that, but if there is a later morning addition, he will want his name cleared by that final morning edition. He will not be satisfied with the fact that "by tomorrow morning it will all be cleared up".

The fact that there could be a desecration of G-d's name for even a minute is something that could not be tolerated.

The Real Heretic Goes To Bed on The Night of the Tenth Plague

The Torah relates that when Moshe came to Pharaoh for the last time, they exchanged their final tense words with each other. Rav Elya Meir Bloch raises the following interesting question: Moshe Rabbeinu had harassed Pharaoh for a long period of time. Each time Moshe came into the palace, it must have been highly aggravating for Pharaoh, to say the least. Why, then, didn't Pharaoh kill Moshe Rabbeinu?

Pharaoh did not need to worry about CNN or about human rights groups. Consider any modern despot in Pharaoh's situation. Wouldn't the simple solution be to just put a quick end to his adversary, once and for all? Why did Pharaoh continue to tolerate Moshe?

Rav Elya Meir Bloch explains that this illustrates the distinction between Pharaoh and modern day tyrants. Moshe Rabbeinu was not merely a nuisance to Pharaoh. This was a theological dispute regarding G-d. Pharaoh was not merely a pragmatist who was simply interested in being rid of a nuisance -- that would not have solved the problem. Pharaoh was not like one of today's two-bit despots, who can be bribed and are only interested in power. Pharaoh was the real heretic. "I'm G-d", he proclaimed. He could not just remove Moshe from the picture. That would be a pragmatic approach. Pharaoh needed to prevail over Moshe. Pharaoh was determined to fight to the bitter end to prove that he was in charge.

One or two hundred years ago, people used to sit in cafes in Paris and talk about the reason for life. "Is there a G-d? Is there not a G-d?" People used to think about weighty matters. Now people think about conveniences -- "what kind of cell phone do you have?" -- and nothing more. People no longer think about G-d and the meaning of life. We live in a silly, trivial, world. Nothing of substance is important anymore. Today, importance is given to the Super Bowl, not to the meaning of life.

The Kotzker Rebbe provides an insight on a Rashi in this week's parsha. During the plague of the first born, the pasuk says, "Pharaoh got up at night..." [Shmos 12:30]. Rashi on this phrase adds the words "from his bed". What is Rashi teaching us?

The Kotzker Rebbe inquires: Was Pharaoh out of his mind? Moshe predicted that every first born would die at midnight. He specifically predicted that Pharaoh's own first-born son would be smitten. Pharaoh was a first born son himself. Should Pharaoh not have at least been sweating it out that evening? No. He went to bed! The only thing that woke him up were the screams of the Egyptians after the plague hit at midnight.

How can a person go to bed on a night like that after nine plagues came true exactly as Moshe predicted? The answer, the Kotzker Rebbe says, is that Pharoah was a real heretic. There is an expression that there are no atheists in a foxhole. That might be true of 'modern atheists'. But the 'old time atheists' -- they remained atheists even in when in a foxhole! Pharoah was the real thing -- a heretic down to the last minute.

"I am going to bed. What happened before were just freaks of nature. I have nothing to worry about." Pharoah was not interested in ridding himself of the nuisance of Moshe Rabbeinu. "I am going to fight this thing to the bitter end." And so he did.

Transcribed by [David Twersky](#); Seattle, Washington.
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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Bo are provided below:

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