

PARSHAS BO

by Dr. Nosson Chayim Leff

Sfas Emes, Zechuso Tagein Aleinu, Bo, 5631

The Sfas Emes begins this ma'amar with a basic question that his grandfather, the Chiddushei HaRim had posed. In redeeming us from enslavement in Egypt, HaShem smote the Egyptians with the Ten Plagues. Why were the Ten Plagues a necessary part of the redemption?

Note that the Torah provides an explicit answer to this question. In the words of HaShem Himself (Shemos, 10:1-2): " ... ulema'an tesapeir ... " (ArtScroll: "and so that you may relate in the ears of your son ... that I made a mockery of Egypt ... "). An explicit answer from HaShem Himself is apparently not good enough for the Chiddushei HaRim or the Sfas Emes. Mevakshei ha'emes -- committed to seeking truth -- they probe more deeply into reality. And HaShem rewards their efforts, by disclosing to them secrets of the Torah-that had previously not been revealed to basar ve'dahm -- to human beings.

The Chiddushei HaRim (and the Sfas Emes) answer: The Mishna in Avos (Perek 5,1) tells us that HaShem created the world with "Asara Ma'amaros" (Ten Utterances). The Chidushei HaRim (and the Sfas Emes) explain that HaShem punished the Egyptians with the Ten Plagues in order to transform the Asara Ma'amaros into the "Aseres Hadibros" (the Ten Commandments -- shorthand for the entire Torah).

I find this statement marvelously poetic. But what does it mean? Is the Sfas Emes playing a word game with the number 'Ten'? Not at all! What he is saying is the following. We know that the Aseres Hadibros came from HaShem. By the same token, the Ten Plagues greatly increased our awareness of HaShem's Presence.was greatly expanded. HaShem' clear and evident intervention in the world (through the Ten Plagues) enabled us to recognize that the laws of Nature (the Asara Ma'amaros) are also a manifestation of His Presence. Finally, this experience helped us learn that just as HaShem instituted laws to govern Nature (the asara ma'amaros) so too did He institute laws to govern our lives: namely, the aseres hadibros (a reference to the entire Torah).

But observe a crucial difference between the laws of nature and the laws of the Torah. An atom has no choice; it must behave in accordance with the laws of physics. Note the contrast with the laws of the Torah. Beginning with Moshe Rabbeinu and continuing with all subsequent nevi'im (prophets), HaShem has repeatedly urged us to observe His laws. Moreover, HaShem has also advised us that conducting ourselves in accordance with the Torah will be to our advantage. Thus, living our lives

following the laws that HaShem has given will enable us to experience va'chai ba'hem' (Va'yikra 18, 5); that is, we will live our lives with chiyus (with zest). But HaShem has also endowed us with bechira chofshis (free will). And we may in fact use our free will to transgress the laws that He has proposed to govern our lives. At this point, a basic question comes to mind; what will be the consequences of such a refusal to abide by HaShem's laws?

Earlier in this ma'amar, the Sfas Emes drew our attention to the parallel between the aseres hadibros and the asara ma'amaros. I suggest that this parallel provides an analogy that will help answer our question. Consider the following (hypothetical) case. A team of engineers has been given the job of designing a new airplane. But they are determined to do the job their way, without regard for the laws of aeronautics. What will happen when they try to fly their new aircraft? The plane will crash, destroying the aircraft and everything on board! Likewise, the very same outcome will result if /when people try to live their lives in a manner that disregards the laws that HaShem has given us to govern our behavior. Human lives will crash, leaving broken hearts, broken minds, and in some cases, broken bodies, as well.

Where can we find evidence of such outcomes in the world? A powerful source of information is available if we want to learn what happens when people choose to reject HaShem's laws for human behavior. That mussar comes from an unexpected source -- The New Yorker magazine. Let me explain.

I sometimes find myself in doctors' waiting rooms. And while I wait, I sometimes read a magazine often found in those rooms: The New Yorker. That weekly is targeted to America's upper-income, upper-education, and upper social-status population -- i.e., people who can, more easily than most, live their lives as they choose rather than in accordance with HaShem's rules. Nevertheless, the life experience mirrored in The New Yorker's short stories is rarely happy. Most commonly, the stories speak of lives in which sad, broken people try (usually without success) to make do in a bleak, barren world.

We move on now to a new line of thought. The Sfas Emes draws our attention to a feature of the Redemption that we often ignore. An unspoken dimension of our liberation from Egypt was: a massive intellectual reorientation. For that is what happened in Egypt. How? As people experienced the Ten Plagues, they came to recognize that HaShem is behind the laws of nature, and that it behooves to obey the laws that He has provided for us.

The shift in worldview that came with the experience of the Ten Plagues took time. The Sfas Emes tells us that change proceeded step by step. One plague sufficed to push aside one false perception about reality. The next plague took us a step further, until the entire shift in worldview was complete. This massive intellectual reorientation was a crucial part of Yetzias Mitzrayim (the Exodus from Egypt). I have the impression that this feature is often slighted in the way we relate to the Redemption from Egypt. By contrast, the Sfas Emes focuses on this feature. He is telling us, in effect,

that we should bear in mind this major intellectual shift when we say in our davening: "zecher liYetzias Mitzrayim"

You may be finding this ma'amar almost too rich to absorb, . But the Sfas Emes continues with an additional (new) line of thought. This ma'amar has frequently referred to Aseres Hadibros, the Ten Commandments. Note the word "dibros". Why ? Because en route to his main message, the Sfas Emes offers us a new perspective on the word "dibra".

The pshat (simple, conventional) meaning of the Hebrew root DBR is: "to speak". But as a good dictionary will tell you, another meaning of DBR is: "to lead". In that vein, the Sfas Emes quotes the Zohar on a phrase that we say every day in the Shema. That phrase is: "Ve'dibarto bahm" (Devarim, 6:7). Following the pshat sense of DBR , ArtScroll translates the phrase as: "... you shall speak of them ... " (i.e., of the Torah and the mitzvos). By contrast, the Sfas Emes's non-pshat reading of the phrase from Shema is: that the words of HaShem -- and His unity and love -- shall guide and lead us forward in all of our actions. Some difference.

A take-home lesson? We should bear in mind that HaShem sent the Ten Plagues to transform the Asara Ma'amaros into the Aseres Hadibros. That is, when we mention Yetzias Mitzrayim, we, too, can liberate ourselves from the secular world-view (i.e., the worldview that says: "no HaShem behind the Ten Plagues;" "no HaShem behind the Asara Ma'amaros;" "no HaShem behind Aseres Hadibros"). We imbibe that secular worldview with the very air that we breathe from the society that surrounds us. Hopefully, the ma'amar of the Sfas Emes will alert us to the problem and help us deal with it.

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