

## **Rabbi Katz's Drashah for Parshat Shemot**

January 9, 2020 - 25 Teivet 5781

In a script that only Hashem could write, we read this week about the transition of power... in Egypt. According to some (Eruvin 53a), it was an entirely new Par'oh who took over after the previous one died. According to others, it was the same Par'oh, but he'd had a change of heart, and a new vision for the country. According to Rav Hirsch, it was something else entirely: "Vayakam melech chadash' by no means designates an ordinary lawful change of dynasty... [it] is always an overthrow by force. So it seems the old dynasty was overthrown..."

What we witnessed this week is hopefully something none of us are proud of. Regardless of one's political opinion, there are lines with which we all agree not to cross, and my impression is that the overwhelming majority of the United States agrees that the violence, aggression, and tactics used in the U.S. Capitol building crossed that line. Transitions of power are usually difficult, especially in such an emotionally charged election and general culture. But that doesn't justify every behavior that stems from those emotions.

Those participating in Daf Yomi are privy to a picture of gemara that many don't see. Typically, when discussing halachah or aggadah (stories) with the general public, people will refer to gemaras that make sense, ones which can be informative, instructive, enlightening, or even amusing. But other gemaras just seem peculiar. Take, for instance, Rav Acha's prescription for someone who has a fever (Shabbos 67a): "On the first day (of the fever), [carve off a little bit of a bush and] say 'And an angel of Hashem appeared to Moshe in the form of a flame of fire from within a bush (Shmeot 3:2)... ' ... And when he carves the bush, he should cut it close to the ground and say: 'The bush, the bush! It was not because you were higher than all other trees that Hashem rested His presence on you. Rather, it was because you were lower. Just as the fire from before Chananyah, Mishael and Azaryah fled, let the fire (fever) flee from before so-and-so (me)'".

Leaving the efficacy of medical and spiritual healing aside, what is the thematic message of this gemara? Why would the burning bush represent a person's fever? It is interesting to note the similarity between this and the Midrash about Har Sinai being a smaller, humbler mountain than the rest (and this bush was on that same mountain, see 3:12). But what does humility have to do with getting rid of a fever?

Before we understand the lesson of the gemara's messages, we first have to deal with a halachic problem. The gemara in Shavuot (15b) actually prohibits one from using pesukim for the sake of healing an illness! How, then, can one quote this week's parshah as a means of ridding oneself of a fever?!

The Me'iri (R' Menachem ben Shmuel, 13th century, S. France) explains that the gemara in Shabbos does not literally prescribe Biblical verses as a means of healing. Instead, the pesukim are meant to give a person the security and confidence that 'this too shall pass'. Just as the burning bush was in

flames but was not to be consumed, so too, this person's fever might be difficult, but they will not succumb to the pain. As Rashi on these pesukim explains, Moshe saw within this non-consuming fire a message of the Jewish people throughout history; that no matter who's jurisdiction we're under, Hashem guarantees our long-term survival. When we, as individuals, get sick, we remind ourselves of this message by quoting these verses.

But what about the last part? Why would Rav Acha invoke humility as a means of healing?

As we at YIOP fulfill each Shabbos morning in shul, the mishnah in Avot (3:2) teaches us: "Rav Chaninah... said, 'pray for the welfare of the government, for were it not for the fear it inspires, every man would swallow his neighbor alive.'" Respect for governance is the equalizer which allows every citizen to function. As we discussed at shul after Mincha on Wednesday, if we feel no security in our environment, we cannot be proper *ovdei Hashem*. We all know about the myriad of times in our history when certain mitzvot were untenable because of our environment, often created from the top down.

Rav Yitzchak Volozhiner ("Reb Itzeleh", son of Rav Chaim, founder of the Volozhiner Yeshiva, 19th century) explains what Hashem wanted to teach Moshe by turning his stick into a snake. As the pasuk recalls, Moshe ran away in fear when it happened (4:3). Hashem was saying, "even if you weren't fit for this (leadership), and you don't have the strength or intellect, everyone will nonetheless respect you. Even this dry stick, if the leader appoints it as an officer, the nation will fear it". Hashem was telling Moshe, that even if he was right, and he was the wrong person for the job, the position itself, and what it represents, elicits the proper respect he needs to lead the people.

The Chasam Sofer interprets the "fire" referred to by the gemara in Shabbos as one's desires and passions. I would humbly suggest, in combination with the Me'iri's explanation above, that we can now understand the meaning behind the last ingredient of overcoming a "fever". The survival of a country rests on the mutual respect and tolerance of the system itself. Regardless of one's opinion of the leadership, party, or platform in power, one's desire cannot overwhelm the balance of safety and security. The symbolic "humility" of the bush is itself what maintains the internal equilibrium of the non-consuming fire. As long as the passionate representatives on both sides maintain the humility to respect the position itself, then the "fire" will not consume the entity. Just as our bodies maintain a consistently high temperature of 98.6 degrees, it can handle slight fluctuations with the understanding that it can reestablish the equilibrium afterwards.

Passion is important. Without it, it's difficult to grow, improve, and develop into better people or better places to live. But we have to make sure that such passion does not threaten the environment itself. If having a difference of opinion meant destruction of the other, then there will be no opinions after a while. If we want to restore our equilibrium and cool ourselves down from the fever pitch of our political environment, we have to commit ourselves to a certain level of humility. And while none of us approve of the actions of the radical and relative few from Wednesday's demonstration, we can all learn -on all sides, of all aisles- how to 'lower the temperature'. Whether it's with family, religion, or health concerns, we should keep the equilibrium in mind, lest we be *plagued* by the loss of that environment altogether.

Shabbat Shalom,

Rabbi Katz