

Parashat Bo, Rabbi James Proops

As I watched this past week's inauguration of President Biden, it was clearly a very different experience from any previous ceremony of its kind. I refer not to the depleted crowd, the heavier security or lack of the previous President's presence, but rather the fact that it was the first Presidential inauguration in which I felt directly invested and affected. It was therefore that I watched with a piqued interest and critical eye. As well as being deeply impressed by the show stealing performance of Amanda Gorman, I found myself intrigued, not for the first time, by the continued references to God in the President's speech and the overt religiosity that surrounded the event. I am aware that this is not a new phenomenon and there is a long tradition of Biblical references in a President's inaugural address, yet how that fits in with the deep held belief in the separation of Religion and State is something I continue to explore and seek to understand.

Nonetheless, there was one reference in the new President's speech that jumped out to me as a clear reference to the *parashiyot* that we are currently reading. In his call for unity across the many divides, President Biden urged Americans to "open our souls instead of hardening our hearts", a clear borrowing of the language the Torah uses to describe Paro's continued defiance in the face of the plagues. Whether one voted for him or not, the notion of not 'hardening our hearts' like Paro, being open to change and listening to the opinions of others, are all qualities that we need to pursue in this most divisive of ages.

A closer look at an intriguing statement of Moshe in this week's *parasha*, can help identify one of the major flaws in Paro's thinking. When warning Paro and his servants about the tenth plague, the death of the firstborns, Moshe proclaimed that it would occur at "כְּחֻצַת הַלַּיְלָה - Around midnight". Why would Moshe be so vague and not say that the plague would occur at exactly midnight? Rashi, anticipating our question, cites the *gemmara* which explains that despite knowing the exact time when the plague would strike, Moshe was concerned that the Egyptian's methodology of timekeeping was not accurate and therefore it would seem to them that the plague would actually occur just before or just after midnight. If Moshe had specified a precise time they would use this inaccuracy to deny that the plague was sent from Hashem.

While this answer explains Moshe's terminology, how can we understand that the Egyptians, despite having seen Moshe's previous nine predictions all come to fruition, would assume that Moshe was wrong and not their timekeeping? The answer is one that we have seen time and again repeat itself throughout the opening *parashiyot* of *Sefer Shemot*. The Egyptians and Paro himself were constantly looking for any excuse to deny the existence of Hashem and the validity of Moshe's role. Any detail, however minor, that could be used to cast doubt on Hashem's omnipotence would be grabbed with absolute enthusiasm.

A similar example of this occurred in last week's *parasha* regarding the cessation of the plague of *Barad* (hail). Moshe proclaimed that “הַקְלוֹת יִחְדָּלּוּ וְהַבָּרָד לֹא יֵעוֹד” - the thunder will cease and the hail will fall no more”, indicating that the plague would stop in that order, first the thunder followed by the hail. The Malbim explains that since light travels faster than sound, Paro first saw that the hail stopped and only seconds after noticed that the thunder had stopped. This led Paro to assume that, since it seemingly occurred in the reverse order, the plague had not been sent by Hashem. Again we must ask how it was that Paro could be so creative in denying that Hakadosh Baruch Hu was the source of the hail? It is clear that Paro was so desperate to retain his current outlook, so arrogant as to not see before him the reality of events as they unfolded, that he would ‘grab at straws’ in order not to back down.

In the continued climate of division and suspicion, I think President Biden's speech writers were spot on with their comparison to the attitude of Paro. We have witnessed the ‘grabbing of straws’ on all sides of the political and social divides, in order to boost one's own position and deride the opinions, beliefs and character of one's opposition. If we stand any chance of repairing the disunity and damage that has been wrought by all sides, then we must be open to hearing and seeing other possibilities, outside of our own convictions. To take the lesson of Paro one step further, it is incumbent on us as Jews, to first recognize that all that we see transpiring before our eyes is the work of Hakadosh Baruch Hu and therefore we must accept it graciously and continue to live our lives according to His dictates, no matter how the reality around us may be changing. May the new era of American politics bring not only greater unity throughout the country, but also may we contribute to a greater revelation of God's Presence in the world.

Shabbat Shalom