

## Parshas Vayakhel/Pekudei/HaChodesh - As Covid Fades, The Lessons Stay

Milestones and anniversary dates are commonly viewed differently by the very people involved in those same occasions. Some place great emphasis on a particular date or time while others dismiss these occurrences as 'just part of life'. Many people throughout the world will take note that it has been a full year since Covid-19 invaded our world, , our families, our very way of life as we once knew it. For me, it was both riveting and even frightening to take note of the events we witnessed together steadily continue to unfold. Now, one year later, I am amazed how HaKadosh Baruch Hu -God - is allowing things to steadily return, at least partially, to life as we once knew it.

This past week I received the second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine; I felt liberated and healthy even though I will continue to wear a mask and socially distance during the next two weeks, allowing time for the vaccine to take its full effect. There was much halachik discussion as to what if any appropriate bracha or tefilla should be recited when receiving this and perhaps other vaccines or medical treatments.

The following explanation of a proper bracha to recite under such circumstances is from Rabbi Dr. Aaron E. Glatt, Associate Rabbi, Young Israel of Woodmere, and Chief of Infectious Diseases & Hospital Epidemiologist at Mount Sinai Hospital of South Nassau. Based on Shulchan Aruch Orech Chaim 230:4 with the Mishnah Brurah Seif Kattan 6, it is proper and recommended to recite the following supplication to Hashem prior to undergoing any medical treatment or procedure. Certainly, this supplication is most appropriate to recite before receiving the lifesaving COVID-19 vaccine: The prayer in Hebrew is: יהי רצון אתה (מלפניך ה' אלוקי שיהא עסק זה לי לרפואה (יש מוסיפים: כי רופא חנם אתה יהי רצון) In English, this is loosely translated as "May it be Your will, Hashem, my G-d, that this treatment will be for me for a cure (and some add, because You are a Healer who cures for free)."

We continue to be patient for more and more people throughout the United States and around the globe to become safe and healthy against this virus. There were many lessons learned and practiced over this period. Some of those good practices fell by the wayside while others modified our personal well-being. These practices or even minhagim – customs - concern how we conducted ourselves, whether they be regarding interpersonal relationships or our own personal relationship with the Almighty. Some of the rules and regulations related to safety and health have eased, and, in some places, are no longer mandated.

In Shul, signs were immediately posted at the onset of the pandemic mandating that we prepare a safe environment. I daven every day in front of a wall that has three signs posted for this purpose. The first sign reads 'Prevent the Spread' with four pictures illustrating- stay home if you're sick; wash your hands; wear a mask; separate. The second sign reads 'Cover your Nose and Mouth' accompanied by a picture of a face mask, illustrating how to wear it properly. The third sign reads 'Social Distancing is Required', depicting a group of people each standing 6ft apart. We humans tend to grow tired of or even annoyed by dictums which recommend taking on precautionary but invasive practices or behaviors. I am not here to dictate or to determine whether or not these practices should continue. I am, however, relating the reality that some of these practices are no longer being... well, practiced! I continue to stand by the principle that we should not forget these seemingly simple but very important safety and health measures. These measures not only continue to protect others as well as ourselves; they also help to make the world we live in a better, more caring place. Therefore, for the sake of our spiritual health and

well-being, we should continue to practice all the health and safety measures that have been so strongly recommended. This is learned out in an immensely powerful message in the Torah.

The Torah, in last week's Parsha Ki Sisa, relates the dialogue Hashem had with Moshe after God told Moshe to quickly go down the mountain because the Jews were sinning. In Shmos 32:7 "וידבר ה' אל" "משה, לך רד כי שחת עמך אשר העלית מארץ מצרים" "God declared to Moshe, 'Go down, for the people who you brought out of Egypt have become corrupt.'" Then, in Shmos 32:8 "סרו מהר מן הדרך אשר צויתם" "עשו להם עגל מסכה" "They have been quick to leave the way that I ordered them to follow, and they have made themselves a cast-metal calf". This one-to-one conversation takes a turn no one could expect or ever imagine. The Midrash Rabbah 46 (which, by the way, if not for the fact that it is written, we never would have been able to say or even think of such an idea) relates that when Hashem told Moshe to descend the mountain, he was holding the Luchos (Tablets). Moshe, not believing that the Jewish people sinned, said, "If I do not see it, I do not believe it!" How do we know that Moshe did not believe the Jews sinned? The question is, why didn't Moshe break the Luchos earlier? The Midrash continues, stating: "We see here, that when Hashem told Moshe, "Go down because your nation has sinned..." he held onto the Luchos and did not believe that the Jews sinned. Wait a minute! Who didn't Moshe believe? Hashem! Hashem told him that the Jewish people had sinned, yet he didn't believe it!! The Midrash continues: "Moshe said: "If I do not see it, I will not believe it." This is confirmed by the Torah eleven verses later. Finally, in Shmos 32:19 "ויהי כאשר קרב אל המחנה וירא את העגל ומחלת ויחר אף משה וישלך מידו" "את הלחת וישבר אתם תחת ההר" "As he approached the camp and saw the calf and the dancing, Moshe displayed anger, and threw down the tablets that were in his hand, shattering them at the foot of the mountain". We see that Moshe only shattered the Luchos/Tablets when he saw with his own eyes. The Midrash goes on, "Woe upon those who testify or say things they have not seen with their own eyes." Is it really possible that Moshe Rabbeinu didn't believe Hashem when He said, "Your nation has sinned?" However, Moshe wanted to teach us an important lesson: Even if one hears something from a trustworthy individual, even if it's the Tzadik, the biggest Rabbi of the generation, he is not allowed to accept it and act upon it until he sees it with his own eyes or hears it with his own ears!

I know that if we took the time to internalize the lesson of this Midrash, we would spare ourselves so much machlokes and conflict. If we just thought about this Midrash and its message, we would avoid so much pain and aggravation. Hashem Himself told Moshe, but Moshe wanted to teach us that even if the most trusted person tells you something, you are not to act upon it until you verify it with your own eyes and ears. The lessons of the three signs in Shul not only give us practical advice; they give us a spiritual guideline as well. If you hear something which states that we can prevent the spread, it is correct to initially hold back in order to properly verify. We should also remember that the mask is used to cover our mouths but also figuratively keeps us from jumping the gun and repeating something that may not be reliable because we heard it from someone else, who may have also heard it from someone whose information may not be reliable. Finally, if there is too much temptation, we may spread false information. In truth, our mask protects others, not ourselves. It is the use of masks by others which, in fact, protect us. Allegorically, if wearing a mask is not enough of a reminder to be quiet, then perhaps social distance from others and wait until verification of something that is so important that we need to believe and repeat. Moshe held back to teach us this lesson. In today's current situation, let's take the lessons and benefits this pandemic has shown us and aspire to live as better Jews, to be leaders, representing truth and goodness, as well as safety and precaution, for all mankind.

Ah Gutten Shabbos, Rabbi Avraham Bogopulsky