

Good Shabbos, everyone.

Thank you to the drasha sponsors:

- Murray and Baila Jacobson, in memory of Baila's father, Joseph Labovitz, whose yahrtzeit is on the 13th of Shevat.
- Eva Katznelson, in memory of her mother, Sara Sterba, whose yahrtzeit is on the 14th of Shevat.
- Larry and Flo Ziffer, in memory of their mothers, Mrs. Rose Ziffer and Mrs. Irene Simon.

May all the *neshamos* have an *aliya* and may all the sponsors be rewarded for their generosity with *bracha* and *hatzlacha*, and good health!

This week, we celebrated the inauguration of the 46th President of the United States, Joe Biden, and Vice President Kamala Harris. We wish them much success in leading our great country and providing safety, security, and stability both at home and throughout the world. This is a time of uncertainty on many levels in this country and beyond, and we daven for peace, health, and prosperity. May Hashem guide them with wisdom, moral clarity, and help them restore unity to a fractured country and provide strong leadership globally, in a world which looks to America for help. Amen.

In Parshas Bo, we read about the final three *makos*, plagues, and the beginning of the actual exodus from Mitzrayim. But one of the plagues is difficult to understand, especially in context of the ascending order of seriousness of the *makos*, the *maka* of *choshech*, the plague of darkness.

As **Rabbi Jonathan Sacks** writes: *“The ninth plague – darkness – comes shrouded in a darkness of its own. What is this plague doing here? It seems out of sequence. Thus far there have been eight plagues, and they have become steadily, inexorably, more serious.*

The first two, the Nile turning blood-red and the infestation of frogs, seemed more like omens than anything else. The third and fourth, gnats and wild beasts, caused worry, not crisis. The fifth, the plague that killed livestock, affected animals, not human beings.

*The sixth, boils, was again a discomfort, but a serious one, no longer an external issue but a bodily affliction...The seventh and eighth, hail and locusts, destroyed the Egyptian grain. Now – with the loss of grain added to the loss of livestock in the fifth plague – there was no food. Still to come was the tenth plague, the death of the firstborn, in retribution for Pharaoh’s murder of Israelite children. It would be this that eventually broke Pharaoh’s resolve. **So, we would expect the ninth plague to be very serious indeed, something that threatened, even if it did not immediately take, human life. Instead, we read what seems like an anti-climax: Then the Lord said to Moses, “Stretch out your hand towards the sky so that darkness will spread over Egypt – darkness that can be felt.”** So Moses stretched out his hand towards the sky, and total darkness covered all Egypt for three days. No one could see anyone else or leave his place for three days. Yet all the Israelites had light in the places where they lived. (Exodus 10:21–23). Darkness is a nuisance, but no more. . .*

Why then does it figure in the plague narrative, immediately prior to its climax? Why did it not happen nearer the beginning, as one of the less severe plagues?

Rabbi Sacks [*Against Their Gods* (Bo 5779)] assumes the *choshech*, darkness was caused by a severe sandstorm that blocked the light of the sun and caused national darkness. He explains:

The plagues were not only intended to punish Pharaoh and his people for their mistreatment of the Israelites, but also to show them the powerlessness of the gods in which they believed. What is at stake in this confrontation is the difference between myth – in which the gods are mere powers, to be tamed, propitiated or manipulated – and biblical monotheism, in which ethics (justice, compassion, human dignity) constitute the meeting point of God and mankind. The symbolism of these plagues, often lost on us, would have been immediately apparent to the Egyptians. . .The significance of the ninth plague is now obvious. The greatest god in the Egyptian pantheon was Ra or Re, the sun god. The name of the Pharaoh often associated with the exodus, Ramses ii, means meses, “son of” (as in the name Moses) Ra, the god of the sun. Egypt – so its people believed – was ruled by the sun. Its human ruler, or Pharaoh, was semi-divine, the child of the sun god. . .The obliteration of the sun signaled that there is a power greater than Ra.

But I would like to suggest a different message and lesson inherent in the plague of darkness. There is an alternate explanation for what *choshech* represented. **Rav Baruch Halevi Epstein**, known as the Torah Temima, suggests that each Egyptian was physically blinded by a film that covered his or her eyes. *Choshech* did not block the sun; it affected each person's ability to see.

תורה תמימה הערות שמות פרק י הערה ב: ומבואר במדרשים שהחושך היה כעובי דינר, וכלל הענין מופלא מאד, דמה שיך להתפיס שיעור ממשות בחושך, וגם צ"ע דלפי פירש"י שהיה כל משך המעל"ע כולו לילה ולא היה יום כלל א"כ נשתנו סדרי בראשית, וזה קשה מאד שהרי הקדוש ברוך הוא הבטיח לנה ולבניו ויום ולילה לא ישבותו. ולולא מסתפינא להמציא דבר חדש מאד ה"א דענין החושך היה לא באויר רק בעיני האנשים, והיינו שהיה מתוח תבלול על אישון העין, ואמרו חכמים שאותו התבלול היה נמוש ביד וגם היה כעובי דינר, וניחא הכל:

The Midrashim explain that the darkness was the thickness of a dinar coin. It seems strange to attribute a measurement to the darkness. Furthermore, if the darkness meant that the sun never appeared, that seems to be a change from creation, and Hashem promised Noah that he would not change the day/night order of creation. Therefore, "were it not that I am afraid," I would suggest a novel interpretation and suggest that choshech was not in the air, but in the eyes of each individual, a film which appeared on the eye which was the thickness of a dinar coin.

What does this interpretation of the plague of blindness represent and what lesson does it teach us? I believe that the fact that each Mitzri was stricken of sight, and was unable to see, represents the lack of moral clarity, of principled vision, of choosing between right and wrong, between good and evil.

The **Ramcha**"I in his *Mesilas Yesharim*, Perek 2, compares one who goes through life without exercising free will, without contemplating, discerning and choosing good over evil, to one who is blind, navigating a river bank...poignantly writing that practically there is no difference between one is actually blind and one who shuts their eyes by choice.

ההולך בעולמו בלי התבוננות אם טובה דרכו או רעה, הנה הוא כסומא ההולך על שפת הנהר אשר סכנתו ודאי עצומה ורעתו קרובה מהצלתו. כי אולם חסרון השמירה מפני העורון הטבעי או מפני העורון הרצוני דהיינו סתימת העינים בבחירה וחפץ, אחד הוא.

One who walks along in his world without contemplating whether his ways are good or evil is similar to a blind man walking on the bank of a river. His danger is certainly very great and his calamity is more likely than his escape. For negligence in guarding oneself from danger due to natural blindness and negligence due to willful blindness, namely shutting one's eyes by choice and desire is one and the same.

והנה ירמיהו היה מתאונן על רוע בני דורו מפני היותם נגועים בנגע המדה הזאת, שהיו מעלימים עיניהם ממעשיהם בלי ששימו לב לראות מה הם: הלהעשות אם להעזב?

Jeremiah would bemoan on the evil of his contemporaries' affliction with the disease of this trait. They would turn a blind eye to their deeds, not putting heart to consider what they were doing, whether to do or refrain from doing it.

ואמר עליהם) ירמיהו ח: (אין איש נחם על רעתו לאמר וגו' כלה שב במרוצתם כסוס שוטף במלחמה .

Regarding them he said: "no man regrets of his evil, saying, What have I done? Each one running to his own course, as the horse rushes into the battle." (Jer. 8:6)

והיינו, שהיו רודפים והולכים במרוצת הרגלם ודרכיהם מבלי שיניחו זמן לעצמם לדקדק על המעשים והדרכים, ונמצא שהם נופלים ברעה בלי ראות אותה .

The explanation is that they would pursue and go by the momentum of habit and conduct, without leaving themselves time to consider their deeds and ways. Thus, they fell into evil without even seeing it.

This interpretation of *choshech* suggests the image of a nation who has lost their moral compass and free choice. It is a society that can no longer see. This complements one of the major themes in the Yetzias Mitzrayim story—free will and the hardening of Paraoth's heart. The Torah testifies that Paraoth's heart was hardened. ויחזק ה' את לב פרעה. From the Midrash through Rishonim, commentators question how God could take away his free will. It does not seem fair and it seems to run counter to a basic tenet of our belief.

Rav Eliyahu Eliezer Dessler, in his famous essay on free will called *Kuntres Habechira*, printed in his *Michtav M'Eliyahu*, Volume I, writes--based on his understanding of the **Ramban**--that God never unilaterally removed Paraoth's free will—Paraoth did it to himself. A person is shaped by their own choices. As Chazal teach, one sin

leads to another sin. The more we engage in one type of behavior, the more natural that behavior becomes, until it becomes second nature and we reach a point where it is almost impossible to change. Paraoth hardened his own heart after each of the first five plagues, and after that, he was on “auto pilot.” The Torah describes this phenomenon in the final five *makos* as Hashem hardening Paraoth’s heart, but it is really expressing a natural phenomenon—that our repeated choices can lead us to a place where, on a practical level, we have lost our ability to choose.

קונטרס הבחירה מכתב מאליהו להר' דסלר (ח"א עמ' 113-115)

ועיי' ברמב"ן (שמות ז':ג') שכתב בביאור א' להכבדת לב פרעה: "כי פרעה ברשעו אשר עשה לישראל רעות גדולות הינם, נתחייב למנוע ממנו דרכי תשובה כו'" בשביל שעשה הרעות הינם, (לא הוצרך להגות ולתירוץ כי היה מוכרח לו לעשות ככה, אך בלי שום אמתלא עשה הינם כל הרעות הגדולות), זהו בחינת הותר לו ובוזה נתחייב ע"פ טבע הבריאה שתמנע התשובה ממנו...

The psychoanalyst and philosopher, **Erich Fromm** in, *Heart of Man* (page 135), writes something very similar: *“Our capacity to choose changes constantly with our practical life. The longer we continue to make wrong decisions, the more our hearts hardens; the more often we make the right decision, the more our heart softens—or better perhaps, becomes alive.. . A classic example of this phenomenon is the biblical story of Pharaoh’s reaction to the demand to let the Hebrews go. He is afraid of the increasingly severe suffering brought upon him and his people; he promises to let the Hebrews go; but as soon as the imminent danger disappears, “his heart hardens,” and he again decides not to set the Hebrews free. This process of the hardening of the heart is the central issue in Pharaoh’s conduct. The longer he refuses to choose the right, the harder his heart becomes...his heart became ever harder until there was no longer any freedom of choice left him.. . If man becomes indifferent to life there is no longer any hope that he can choose good. Then indeed, his heart will have so hardened that his life will be ended...*

Rabbi Jonathan Sacks elaborates from a scientific standpoint, [Freewill: Use It or Lose It (Va’era 5778)], *“The truth is that the more we understand about the human brain, the better able we are to describe what free action really is. . .Patterns of behaviour are shaped by neural pathways connecting different parts of the brain. . .the more often we behave in certain ways, the harder it is to break the habit and create a new and different pathway. To do so requires the acquisition of new habits, acted on consistently for an extended period of time. Current scientific thinking suggests that a minimum of 66 days is needed to form a new habit. So, we now have a scientific way of explaining the hardening taking place in Pharaoh’s heart. Having established a pattern of response to the first five plagues, he would find it progressively more difficult at every level – neuro-scientifically, psychologically and politically – to change. The same is true of every bad habit and political decision. Almost all our structures, mental and social, tend to reinforce previous patterns of behaviour. So, our freedom diminishes every time we fail to exercise it.*

If so, then today’s parsha and contemporary science tell the same story: that freedom is not a given, nor is it an absolute. We have to work for it. We acquire it slowly in stages, and we can lose it, as Pharaoh lost his, and as drug addicts, workaholics, and people addicted to computer games lose theirs. . .

That takes rituals, whose repeated performance creates new neural pathways and new rapid-response behaviour. It requires a certain calibrated distance from the surrounding culture, if we are not to be swept away by social fads and fashions that seem liberating now but destructive in retrospect. It needs a mental mindset that pauses before any significant action and asks, “Should I do this? May I do this? What rules of conduct should I bring to bear?” It involves an internalised narrative of identity, so that we can ask of any course of action, “Is this who I am and what I stand for?”

It is no accident that the elements listed in the previous paragraph are all prominent features of Judaism, which turns out to be an ongoing seminar in willpower and impulse control. Now that we are beginning to understand the plasticity of the brain, we know at least a little of the neuroscience that lies behind the ability to overcome bad habits and addictions. Keeping Shabbat, for example, has the power to liberate us and our children from smartphone addiction and all that goes with it. The religion whose first festival, Pesach, celebrates collective freedom, gives us, in its rituals, the skills we need for personal freedom.

Freedom is less a gift than an achievement. Even a Pharaoh, the most powerful man in the ancient world, could lose it. Even a nation of slaves could, with the help of God, acquire it. Never take freedom for granted. It needs a hundred small acts of self-control daily, which is what halakhah, Jewish law, is all about.

Freedom is a muscle that needs to be exercised: use it or lose it. That is a life-transforming idea.

And that principle is summed up in the first *mitzva* given to the Jewish people—*kiddush ha-chodesh*—recognizing and sanctifying the new moon. This is such an important and fundamental *mitzva* that **Rashi** in his first comment on Breishis suggests the Torah should have begun with it. What is the deeper meaning of this *mitzva*? The 15th century Italian Biblical commentator, **Rav Ovadia Seforno**, comments that Hashem said the starting point of life is to control your time:

ספורנו שמות פרק יב פסוק ב

(ב) החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים. מכאן ואילך יהיו החדשים שלכם, לעשות בהם כרצונכם, אבל בימי השעבוד לא היו ימיכם שלכם, אבל היו לעבודת אחרים ורצונם, לפיכך ראשון הוא לכם לחדשי השנה. כי בו התחיל מציאותכם הבחירי:

The Seforno comments: *from here on, the months belong to you and you can do with them as you please. In the time of slavery your days were not your own; they were according to the will and the whim of other people. This begins your existence with free choice.* And, as the **Sefas Emes** teaches us, the suggestion that the Torah should have begun with this *mitzva*, is because it teaches us the lesson of renewal, the ability to control your destiny going forward.

שפת אמת בראשית פרשת נח

והתורה ללמד לעשות ולכן אמרו שהוצרך התורה להתחיל מהחדש הזה לכם מצוה ראשונה כו'. זה ההתחדשות שבא ע"י האדם ומאברהם התחיל ב' אלפים תורה:

Kiddush ha-chodesh is the lesson of time and control—and within the power to control time is also the lesson of renewal. . .

The first lesson of the Torah is that it is never too late to change course. It is never too late to take the first step to regain control over your life and your destiny—to bring light into dark areas of the world. Each new month represents a new opportunity—a new chance at life. It is an opportunity to take the small step necessary to regain control...but it doesn't happen by itself...

As the month ends, the moon disappears—the light is gone, our vision may be lost—but it returns...symbolizing our power and ability to control our destiny, which can be restored at any moment we decide to make that vision a reality. The new moon is a lesson of hope and repair in our moments of despair. The new moon provided a lesson the Jews needed to hear as they left Mitzrayim, hoping to rebuild, and it provides a timeless message for humanity.

I want to end with some lines from the very moving original composition the 22-year-old National Youth Poet Laureate and Harvard University graduate, **Amanda Gorman** delivered at the inauguration on Wednesday.

***When day comes we ask ourselves,
where can we find light in this never-ending shade?***

...We will rebuild, reconcile and recover.

*And every known nook of our nation and
every corner called our country,
our people diverse and beautiful will emerge,
battered and beautiful.*

***When day comes we step out of the shade,
aflame and unafraid,
the new dawn blooms as we free it.***

***For there is always light,
if only we're brave enough to see it.
If only we're brave enough to be it.***

This is a beautiful expression of the emotions of *kiddush ha-chodesh*. As Hashem told Moshe **קדש ראה וקדש**—find the light of the new moon and sanctify it. The lesson is that light can emerge even if you have been living in a state of darkness for a while, you just have to look for it. May we have the courage to always exercise our free will and express moral clarity and be proud of our Jewish values and heritage. May we merit to see the end of the dark *galus* with a bright and clear future where Hashem's glory lights up the world. May we merit to see the rebuilding of the Beis Hamikdash soon, bimhera viyamenu...amen.