
Yad Avraham Institute
Weekly Torah Commentaries Series

Portion of Bo

Presented By: Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, *Shlita*

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About the Yad Avraham Institute

The Yad Avraham is a Torah learning institute located in midtown Manhattan. Classes are offered every day during the week starting at 5:50am and throughout the day. Classes in Chumash, Halacha, Hashkafa, Gemara, and general topics are well attended by businessmen, professionals, and students. The Yad Avraham invites you to participate in our extensive offerings of classes and events.

Bo

Presented by

Rabbi Yosef Kalatsky, Shlita

Dean

1. Evading Truth Despite its Obvious Presence

The Torah states regarding the plague of frogs, which was the second of the ten plagues, **“Pharaoh summoned Moshe and Aaron and said, ‘Entreat Hashem that He remove the frogs from me and my people...Moshe said to Pharaoh, ‘...when should I entreat for you...to excise the frogs from you and from your houses?’...and Pharaoh said, ‘Tomorrow.’”** The plague of frogs disrupted every aspect of life in Egypt. Their homes, ovens, and even their innards were inundated with frogs. It was a menace that could not be tolerated. If this is so, why did Pharaoh not want Moshe to remove the frogs immediately? Why did Pharaoh say “tomorrow” when he could have said “immediately?”

Sforno explains regarding sorcery, when an incantation is initiated, its effect cannot be stopped until the incantation completes its course. However, if something is brought about by the Hand of G'd, it can cease immediately if G'd Wills it so. Just as G'd Wills it to be, He Wills it to cease to be. When Pharaoh had witnessed the first two plagues of blood and frogs that Moshe had brought about, he summoned his sorcerers to replicate them, he thus attributed the first two plagues to witchcraft, rather than to the Hand of the Divine. The basis for Pharaoh's rejection of Moshe's credibility as G'd's agent was that he attributed the miracles of that Moshe brought about to sorcery. Therefore, When Moshe had asked Pharaoh, when would he like to have the plague of frogs cease, Pharaoh was willing to endure the pain for an extended period of time rather than be confronted with irrefutable proof that it was G'd causing the plague and not sorcery. He thus chose to say “tomorrow” rather than “now!”

The Torah tells us that before the splitting of the Sea, there was a fierce easterly wind that blew throughout the night. When morning had come, the Sea split. The splitting of the Sea, which was the greatest supernatural

event to ever occur, clearly defined G'd's dominion over existence. If this is so, why was it necessary that the precursor to this supernatural event be a fierce wind that blew throughout the night? Chinuch explains that whenever G'd performs a revealed miracle, despite its dimension, it is always presented in a context that if one chooses to deny it as being a G'dly act, one has that prerogative. Therefore, G'd caused a fierce wind to blow as a precursor to the splitting of the Sea. This was so that if one would chose to deny the event as a miracle, he is able to attribute the splitting of the Sea to the wind rather than to G'd. Consequently, it will not impinge upon one's free choice.

Pharaoh was in a position to choose to have Moshe pray to have the plague of frogs removed immediately, but he chose to have him pray the following day. By doing so, Pharaoh avoided being confronted with the undeniable truth and thus maintained his ability to choose to ignore G'd's existence. Although his response to Moshe was the cause of his people to continue to suffer for an additional day, his position to deny G'd was more important than to elevate his suffering and that of his people.

2. G'd's Providence in All Aspects of Existence

At the beginning of the Portion of Bo G'd communicates to Moshe the objective of the upcoming plagues, **“...I have made his (Pharaoh) heart and the heart of his servants stubborn so that I can put these signs of Mine in his midst; and so that you may relate in the ears of your sons and your son's sons that I made a mockery of Egypt and My signs that I have placed among them- that you may know that I am Hashem.”** What is the value of communicating to one's children and grandchildren that G'd had made a mockery of Egypt? It would seem that it would be sufficient that the Jewish people recognize G'd as the Omnipotent One, due to the revealed miracles that they had witnessed in Egypt. What

is the additional value of understanding that He made a mockery of Egypt?

The Midrash tells us that the Jewish people amassed wealth on three occasions: during the plague of blood, when they borrowed the gold and silver vessels from their Egyptian masters, and from the spoils of the Sea. The Torah tells us that the first of the Ten Plagues that came upon Egypt was the plague of blood. All the water of Egypt was transformed into blood. The Jewish people were not affected by this plague. If an Egyptian needed water, he had to purchase it from the Jew. If the Egyptian would take the water from the Jew without payment, it would turn to blood.

The second occasion that the Jewish people amassed wealth was when they borrowed the precious gold and silver vessels of their Egyptian masters. Before the tenth plague, the Jewish people were told by G'd to borrow precious vessels (of silver and gold) and garments from their Egyptian masters. The Torah states when the Jewish people asked to borrow the wealth from their masters, **"They found special favor in the eyes of the Egyptians..."** This accumulation of wealth was a fulfillment of the promise that G'd had given to Avraham, our Patriarch at the Covenant Between the Parts. The Torah states, **"You shall know that your offspring will be strangers in a land that is not their own. There, they ... The nation that will enslave them will be judged and then they will go out with great wealth."** The third time the Jewish people amassed great wealth was after the Sea had closed upon the Egyptian armies that were pursuing them. The Sea cast out the remains of the Egyptians along with their horses and chariots upon the seashore. The chariots and horses were bedecked with gold and precious jewels from the treasuries of Pharaoh. Chazal tell us that the spoils of the Sea were greater than the spoils that they had taken when they left Egypt. Although each Jew had left Egypt with no less than forty pack animals of gold and silver, the spoils at the Sea were even greater. Apart from the fulfillment of the promise that G'd had made to Avraham, what was the value of the Jewish people accumulating such enormous wealth?

In order for the Jewish people to gradually extricate themselves and transition from their state of bondage to a state of freedom, they needed to undergo an internal process. This process was a prerequisite to become G'd's Holy people at Sinai. Since the Jewish people had been enslaved and were regarded as lowly chattel, they needed to regain their standing and appreciate their own self-worth. The Gemara in Tractate Shabbos

states, "Wealth is referred to as 'y'kum (to stand).' Why is it called this? It is because wealth allows one to stand on his own two feet." When one has wealth, he feels secure. At this point in time, it was necessary for the Jew to have a sense of his self-worth. During the plague of blood, the Egyptian master needed to turn to his Jewish slave to purchase water from him in order to live. The Jew was in a position to dictate life and death to his master. If the Egyptian was willing to pay for the water, it would remain water and he would live.

Although the Jewish people had become wealthy at the time of the plague of blood, their self-esteem and status as free men needed to be restored. This was brought about as a result of the Jew being seen as special in the eyes of his master. This occurred when the Egyptians felt privileged to lend their most precious possessions to the Jewish people. Initially, when the Egyptians needed to purchase the water from the Jew to survive, he did not give special value to the Jewish people. While it gave a sense of empowerment to the Jewish people it did not give them a sense of self-worth because the Egyptian was coerced into buying the water from them. It was only when the Egyptians gladly gave their wealth to the Jew because they felt privileged, that the Jewish people gained a sense of self-worth. The wealth that was given by the Egyptians to the Jewish people was only a means to an end. Having a sense of being special was a prerequisite for them to receive the Torah at Sinai as G'd's holy people.

The Jewish people were the slaves of the mightiest and most advanced civilization in existence. Pharaoh's empire as it had evolved was seen by all humanity as if it were invincible. During the ten months when the plagues came upon Egypt, G'd destroyed Egypt and reduced it to rubble. G'd had displayed His Omnipotence through the plagues. After the plague of hail, nothing remained whole in Egypt, except for the wheat and spelt crops. Pharaoh chose to believe that the reason the wheat and spelt crops were not destroyed was because G'd did not have control over these two crops. It proved to Pharaoh that G'd was a deity like all other powers in existence. Pharaoh did not understand that the only reason G'd allowed the wheat and spelt crops to remain, was to give Pharaoh a false sense of security and subsequently to allow the locusts to destroy them. G'd thus made a mockery of Egypt. The Jewish people needed to internalize that all that happens is because of G'd's Wills it to be so. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were only able to dominate the Jewish people because G'd allowed them to be so. Their power and aura of invincibility were endowed by G'd. After the plague of

hail, the subsequent plagues were to demonstrate that G'd had made a mockery of Egypt. It was important for the Jewish people to fully appreciate and internalize that Pharaoh and the Egyptians were not their true masters, but rather it was G'd. Pharaoh and the Egyptians were no different than the puppet being controlled by the puppeteer. This concept is stated in our prayers on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, "He coronates kings, but He has the Kingdom..." With this understanding, the Jew would be able to fully embrace and submit to G'd and become His subject at Sinai.

3. Dasan and Aviram, Meriting Redemption

The Torah tells us that ninth plague that came upon Egypt was darkness, As it states, **"...there shall be darkness upon the land of Egypt, and the darkness will be tangible...no man could see his brother nor could anyone rise from his place for a three-day period; but for the Children of Israel there was light in their dwellings."** Rashi cites Chazal, "Why was the plague of darkness brought upon them? There were evil people (Jews) among the generation who did not want to leave Egypt. They died during the three-day period of darkness, so that the Egyptian people should not see the death of these Jews and say, 'See! They are being smitten as we are!' Therefore there were three days of darkness to conceal the death and burial of the Jews (who were killed by G'd)."

Sifsei Chachamim cite Rashi who explains that each of the plagues were the equivalent of a strategy that is utilized during a war in order to incapacitate and destabilize the enemy. Thus, the plague of darkness came upon Egypt to disorient them and make them vulnerable as one brings darkness upon his enemies in order to destroy them. If this is so, seemingly the plague of darkness is unrelated to concealing the death of the evil Jews who did not want to leave Egypt. Sifsei Chachamim explain that if the plague of darkness were only to disorient the Egyptians, as a strategy of war, it would have been sufficient to bring upon them one day of darkness (rather than three). In addition, if the plague were to last for three days in order to weaken and confuse the Egyptians, it would have been sufficient to remain at the same level of darkness. However, Chazal explain that during the last three days of the plague the darkness became so thick and tangible that the Egyptians were immobilized where they sat or stood. They could not move in any direction. This more intense level of darkness was

brought about to ensure that they would not be aware of the death and burial of the evil Jews.

If the plagues that came upon Egypt were revealed miracles which were obvious to all that G'd is the Omnipotent Being and He was intervening on behalf of His people, why would any Jew not want to leave Egypt? However, Chazal tell us that four-fifths of the Jewish people died during the plague of darkness because they did not want to leave.

Dasan and Aviram, who were evil and attempted to undermine Moshe at every point, did not die during the three days of darkness because they wanted to go out of Egypt. Although they were the ones who had initially informed on Moshe that he had killed the Egyptian, which caused him to flee to Midian, they nevertheless did not want to remain in Egypt. Thus, not all the evil people died during the plague of darkness, but rather only those who did not want to leave Egypt. Dasan and Aviram did not doubt that G'd was the Omnipotent Being, but rather they could not tolerate Moshe being in a position of superiority and acting as the Redeemer and leader of the Jewish people. They were descendants of Reuvain who was the firstborn of Yaakov. Because of their pedigree, Dasan and Aviram believed that they had the right to lead the Jewish people. When Moshe initially interceded with them (when one had raised his hand to strike the other) they responded, **"Who appointed you... a judge over us?"** During the uprising of Korach, Dasan and Aviram continued to usurp and undermine Moshe's authority and authenticity of his word. Although they continuously attempted to undermine Moshe, they always believed that G'd was the One Who dictates existence and Who would redeem the Jewish people from Egypt.

During the Musaf Service of Rosh Hashanah, in the portion of *Zichronos* (Remembrances) we quote verses that cause G'd to recall events of the past that will allow the Jewish people to be remembered in a positive vein. One of the verses that is recited is from the prophet Yermiya. He said, "I (G'd) will always remember on your behalf the kindness of your youth that you followed Me into an unplanted desert." Because the Jewish people were willing to leave Egypt, which was a relatively secure location to go out into a barren desert to follow G'd, He will remember this kindness until the end of time. Although all the Jewish people witnessed the revealed miracles of Egypt, only one-fifth of them actually wanted to leave because they trusted that G'd would do as He said. Dasan and Aviram were part of those who trusted G'd and

wanted to leave Egypt. The basis for their evil was their issue with Moshe due to their arrogance. They continuously desired power and glory.

4. Communication, a Means to Truth

The Torah states regarding the last of the ten plagues, the killing of the firstborn, **“Moshe said (to Pharaoh), ‘So said Hashem: At about midnight I shall go out in the midst of Egypt. Every firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die...’”** The Gemara in Tractate Berachos states, “King David writes in Psalms, ‘At midnight I will rise to give thanks for Your righteous ordinances.’ Moshe had said regarding the tenth plague in Egypt that it would take place **‘about midnight.’** Is it possible that King David knew exactly when midnight was and Moshe did not? In addition, it seems from the verse that G’d Himself had said **‘about midnight.’** Is it possible that the Omnipotent One does not know exactly when midnight is? In fact, G’d had said to Moshe that He would kill the firstborn exactly at midnight. Why then did Moshe alter the words of G’d to say to Pharaoh that the plague would occur at **‘about midnight?’** Moshe thought that since the astrologers of Egypt would incorrectly calculate the exact moment of midnight, it would cause them to believe that the plague did not take place as Moshe had said it would. Moshe would be accused of being a liar. Moshe said, ‘If I cannot prove and confirm that the plague is taking place exactly at midnight, I prefer to present its moment in an ambiguous context so that I should not be accused of being false.’”

Nine of the ten plagues had already occurred exactly as Moshe had said they would. In addition, when Pharaoh had asked Moshe to remove the plagues, Moshe acquiesced to his request and they were removed precisely as Moshe had requested from G’d. How is it possible that the astrologers of Egypt would be able to discredit Moshe by accusing him of being false because the plague did not occur at the exact moment that he had said?

As G’d’s agent, Moshe’s objective was for Pharaoh and the Egyptian people to acknowledge G’d as the Almighty and Omnipotent Being. He wanted to establish G’d in existence, beyond a doubt, as the One who Wills and dominates everything. If Moshe were to be perceived as a liar, regardless of how clear and obvious the revealed miracles had been, his credibility would come into question. If Moshe’s credibility as G’d’s agent would be tarnished, then regardless of how cogent and compelling he had been in the past, he would no longer be

effective. Since it was not possible to prove that the tenth plague would come “exactly” at midnight, Moshe said “about midnight.” He chose to deliberately be vague so as not to be viewed as a liar, thus jeopardizing all that had affected the Egyptians through the previous nine plagues. From here we learn that if one is asked a question and cannot prove the answer, which he knows to be correct, he should respond, “I do not know” rather than being called a liar.

It is important to note that despite the fact that Moshe knew the exact time of midnight, he chose to be vague in order not to undermine his credibility and mission to establish G’d’s Dominion. Moshe was able to do this because he was the most humble man who ever walked the face of the earth. If Moshe had even a slight degree of ego that needed to be addressed, he may not have been able to suppress his knowledge of the exact time of midnight, despite the negative consequences of saying it. Moshe negated himself totally to G’d and only thought of preserving His Honor and Glory. Therefore, he understood that he needed to say “about midnight” regardless of how it reflected upon him personally.

5. Pharaoh’s Arrogant Stance

The Torah states, **“Moshe and Aaron came to Pharaoh and said to him, ‘So said Hashem, G’d of the Hebrews, Until when will you refuse to humble (lei’aanos) yourself before Me?’”** Rashi cites Targum who explains the word “lei’aanos (to humble)” to mean “to subordinate.” Rashi also explains that the word “lei’aanos” is derived from the word “aanee (impoverished).” Unlike the wealthy person who can pride himself by attributing his success to his own initiative and ability, the impoverished person has no basis to pride himself because he has nothing. The Gemara in Tractate Nidah tells us that one of the individuals who G’d despises is the poor man who is arrogant. One could understand the basis for the arrogance of the wealthy man; however, the sense of superiority of the poor person is unjustified.

When Moshe addressed Pharaoh seven plagues had already devastated and decimated Egypt. After the plague of hail, nothing remained whole in Egypt except for the wheat and spelt crops. Everything else had been destroyed. Pharaoh’s original kingdom was a faint recollection of the past. His kingdom was virtually reduced to rubble, yet he refused to humble himself before G’d by recognizing and acknowledging his predicament.

The Gemara in Tractate Sanhedrin tells us that if suffering and tragedy come upon an individual, one is forbidden to have compassion for him. Why is this so? The Gemara is not referring to every person who is in a state suffering. Rabbeinu Yonah explains that there are a number of reasons a person may suffer. Suffering may come upon an individual to compel him to repent. Suffering may also come upon one who needs spiritual rehabilitation. Thus, the suffering is atonement. Another level of suffering is one that is intended to destroy the individual because he is evil and has no chance to repent. This is the individual for which one should not have compassion because G'd is inflicting upon him suffering to destroy him. Therefore, the one who has compassion for him is actually interfering with the process because he will lessen the suffering. Despite the fact that G'd had brought great suffering upon Pharaoh, he refused to humble himself before G'd. He rejected the opportunity to repent.

The Torah states, **“G'd hardened the heart of Pharaoh...”** Some commentators explain that G'd had withdrawn Pharaoh's free choice. He no longer had the ability to repent or change his ways. If this is so, then why would G'd expect him to humble himself before Him, if he no longer had the ability to choose? It is to teach the Jewish people for generations to come until the end of time that it is possible for one to be so consumed by his own arrogance that despite the fact that he is on the brink of destruction, he will not acknowledge defeat or humble himself. Although Pharaoh was unable to correct his ways, we should learn the lesson that if one is willing to humble himself, then he will merit the clarity to be able to repent.