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Parshat Metzorah / Shabbos HaGadol

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GOLD IN THEM THAR WALLS

by Rabbi Mordechai Kamenetzky

This week, in the parshah of Metzorah, we deal with the physio-spiritual plague of tzora'as. Tzora'as is a discoloration that appears in varying forms on human skin, on hair, clothing, and even on the walls of one's home. The afflicted individual must endure a complicated process of purification in order to rejoin the community. The Talmud explains that tzoraas is a divine punishment for the sins of slander and gossip. In fact, the Talmud in Arachin 16b comments that the reason that the afflicted is sent out of the camp was because "he separated friends and families through his words, and deserves to be separated from his community."

Rashi and the Ramban explain that the first form of tzora'as does not begin on the person. Hashem in His mercy first strikes at inanimate objects -- one's possessions. The discoloration first appears on the walls of a home, forcing the affected stones to be removed and destroyed. If that event does not succeed as a wake-up-call, and the person continues his malevolent activities, then his clothing is affected. If that fails, eventually the flesh is transformed and white lesions appear, forcing the afflicted to leave the Jewish camp until the plague subsides and the Kohen declares him acceptable to return.

Rashi tells us that the first stage of tzora'as -- the home -- is actually a blessing in disguise. Tzora'as on a home can indeed bring fortune to the affected. As the Israelites were approaching the Land of Canaan, the inhabitants, figuring that one day they would re-conquer the land, hid all their gold and silver inside the walls of their homes. When one dislodged the afflicted stones of his home he would find the hidden treasures that were left by the fleeing Canaanites.

It is troubling. Why should the first warning of tzora'as reek of triumph? What message is Hashem sending to the first offender by rewarding his misdeeds with a cache of gold? What spiritual import is gained from the materialistic discovery?

After the end of World War II, the brilliant and flamboyant Torah sage, Rabbi Eliezer Silver visited and aided thousands of survivors in displaced persons camps in Germany and Poland who were waiting to find permanent homes. One day, as he was handing out Siddurim and other Torah paraphernalia, a Jewish man flatly refused to accept any. "After the way I saw Jews act in the camp, I don't want to have any connection with religion!" Rabbi Silver asked him to explain what exactly had turned him off from Jewish practice.

"I saw a Jew who had a Siddur, yet he only allowed it to be used by the inmates in exchange for their daily bread ration. Imagine," he sneered, "a Jew selling the right to daven for bread!" "And how many customers did this man get?" inquired Rabbi Silver. "Far too many!" snapped the man. Rabbi Silver put his hand around the gentlemen and gently explained. "Why are you looking at the bad Jew who sold the right to pray? Why don't you look at the many good Jews who were willing to forego their rations and starve, just in order to pray? Isn't that the lesson you should take with you?"

Perhaps Hashem in His compassion is sending much more to the gossiper than a get-rich-quick scheme. He shows the first-time slanderer to look a little deeper at life. On the outside he may see a dirty wall of a former Canaanite home. Dig a little deeper and you will find gold in them thar walls. Next time you look at a person only superficially -- think. Dig deeper. There is definitely gold beneath the surface. Sometimes you have to break down your walls to find the gold you never thought it existed.

Know Your Limitations

by Rabbi Yehoshua Berman

Regarding *tzaraas* spots found on the walls of one's house, the Torah emphasizes that one must tell the *kohein* that he found a spot that *looks* like *tzaraas*: "And the one to whom the house belongs will come, and he will tell the *kohein* [by] saying, '[something] like a *negah* has appeared to me in the house'" (14:35)." Rashi elaborates that even if the home-owner is a *Talmid Chacham* and knows with certainty that the spot is indeed *tzaraas*, he may not declare that he found *tzaraas* in his house; rather he must say that he found something that looks like a *tzaraas*-spot.

At first glance, it would seem that the lesson here is one of humility. He must not presume that he knows the law with certainty; rather he must humbly say that it looks like it is *tzaraas*.

But, if that is the case, doesn't it seem like false humility? If the homeowner is indeed a *Talmid Chacham* to whom other questions of *halacha* that span the entire Torah gamut are constantly addressed, why would it smack of arrogance for him to say that it is definitely *tzaraas*? Furthermore, why is this lesson of humility for the *Talmid Chacham* being taught here? Isn't it a general idea that would be more appropriate in the section of the Torah that teaches us about the authority of the *Chachamim* and instructs them in how to *pasken*?

Chazal revealed that the main cause of the affliction of *tzaraas* is *lashon hara*. What brings one to speak *lashon hara*?

The *Chafetz Chaim* teaches that if a situation arises whereby one could judge one's fellow favorably and he instead assumes guilt - and as a result of which speaks negatively of that person - he has thus violated the prohibition of *lashon hara*. Although this is but one example of a violation of the prohibition of *lashon hara*, we can nevertheless cull from here that judging one's fellow unfavorably is one of the root causes of slander, if not its principal cause.

Chazal teach us, "Do not judge your fellow until you reach his place (Avos 2:5)." We are also taught that (in general) a judge should not judge a court case by himself, "for there is only One Who judges alone (Avos 4:10)."

When we see another person doing something, we do not know the myriad details which lie behind his action. Every person is an entire world of thoughts, emotions, life circumstances, life experiences, difficulties, intellect, level of wisdom and understanding. Therefore, it is quite presumptuous indeed for one to jump to a negative conclusion about something they really don't know too much about.

Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place.

True, the homeowner may be a knowledgeable scholar who knows the law with complete clarity. Nevertheless, if he attempts to make a pronouncement that the spot is *tzaraas*, he is presuming to assume a role that is not his.

The Torah states very clearly that only a *kohein* is authorized to pronounce whether the spot is pure or impure; nobody else can. So, with all of his knowledge and understanding, this *Talmid Chacham* must still know his place, his limitations⁴.

This point is a crucial lesson in order to avoid *lashon hara*: No matter how intelligent, knowledgeable, and wise you may be - you must nevertheless recognize your limitations. Do not jump to judge your fellow negatively - know your limitations, know your boundaries. Do not presume to be a lone judge, for there is only One Who judges alone. Do not judge your fellow until you have reached his place - and realize that that place is so multidimensional and complex that the chance that you have or ever will reach it is practically nil.

Of course, just as there are unique or extenuating circumstances that would permit or require a *dayan* to deal with a court case by himself, so too there are situations where a person may be permitted, or perhaps even required to clearly define the actions of his fellow as completely wrong. The *Chafetz Chaim* discusses the particulars of these *halachos* at length. The central point, though, that we need to absorb, is that to approach such matters from a presumptuous, arrogant stance is wrong and will inevitably lead one to violating the prohibitions (even though, in his arrogance, he is convinced of the truth and justice of his assertion). Rather, one's outlook must be exceedingly humble, and with that approach one will certainly be able to find ways to judge others favorably, or at the very least think of mitigating factors that greatly lessen the negative impression of the subject. And this, in turn, will greatly assist us in avoiding the terrible sin of *lashon hara*.

Understanding the Tzaraat on the Houses

by Rabbi Yehonasan Gefen

The Torah Portion Metzora outlines the various forms of the affliction of *tzaraat*. Having completed discussion of the *tzaraat* on the body, the Torah discusses the *tzaraat* that can appear on people's houses and outlines the painful process of purification. This includes removing all the possessions from one's home to avoid them becoming impure, and cutting out the afflicted stones from the house.

The Rabbinical sources offer two seemingly contradictory explanations as to why *tzaraat* will appear on someone's house. Rashi brings the Midrash that tells us that this was actually very beneficial for the people whose homes had *tzaraat*: The Emorites who lived in Canaan hid their valuables in the walls of their homes so that the Jewish people would not be able to benefit from them. There would have been no way of the Jews finding these treasures in the normal course of events. Therefore, God placed the *tzaraat* affliction on the part of the wall where the treasure was concealed, so that the stones hiding it would be removed, thus revealing the fortune. This explanation implies that the *tzaraat* on the house was not a punishment for any wrong doing rather it was a means of providing the people with great riches.

On the other hand, the Gemara in Arachin clearly states that *tzaraat* on the houses was a punishment for the sin of *tzarat ayin* (stinginess). The Gemara in Yoma gives an example of such behavior of a person who didn't want to lend his possessions to other people therefore he would deny owning the items that people asked to borrow. As a punishment his home would be struck with *tzaraat* and he would have to take everything outside. Consequently everyone would see that he really did own those items. These Gemaras clearly indicate that *tzaraat* on the houses came as a punishment for sins. How do we resolve the contradiction between these *Maamarei Chazal* (sayings of the Sages): According to the source quoted by Rashi, if they deserved the reward of the treasure, why did that have to be accompanied by the suffering involved in the *tzaraat* striking their house. And according to the Gemaras, if they deserved to be punished, why should they benefit by finding the hidden treasure behind their walls?!

Rav Moshe Feinstein answers that it must be that the person whose home is struck with *tzaraat* is deserving of both the punishment and the benefit that arise as a result of the affliction. If he had never sinned then God would provide him with the money that he deserves in another, more pleasant fashion. And if he was undeserving of finding the Emorites' hidden treasure then the *tzaraat* on his house would not enable him to find it. Therefore, the person whose house would be struck with *tzaraat* and then found the hidden treasure must look at both aspects of the Divine Providence. On the one hand he can rejoice in God's kindness in granting him the newfound riches; but at the same time, he must try to repent and not allow himself to be distracted by the good tidings.

It is possible to add that the nature of the reward is also connected to the sin that the person committed. He was guilty of being overly miserly and therefore resorted to dishonest tactics in order to protect his wealth. His mistake was that he approached acquisition of property with a *derech hateva* attitude. This means that he followed the regular laws of nature and common sense that dictate that giving charity or lending one's items will cause a person to suffer a decline in his wealth. He believed that being stingy would protect his wealth. Consequently, he is punished by suffering a financial loss with the damage to his home, and with the embarrassment of being exposed as a dishonest person who avoids lending his property. Yet perhaps the reward of finding the hidden treasure also teaches him a lesson with regard to his erroneous attitude. He believed that he had to resort to underhanded tactics to gain wealth, but the Torah tells him that God, with his Infinite power, can provide a person with wealth in any number of ways. Thus, this man finds money in the most improbable of places - inside the walls of his own home! As well as benefitting him it should teach him that he need not exert excessive energy in acquiring wealth, rather he should recognize that God can provide him with everything that he needs.

We learn two very important lessons from the above explanation. Firstly, in a general application, we see that Divine Providence can work in such a way that God, in His Infinite Wisdom can reward and 'punish' someone at the same time. The Torah sense of punishment does not mean merely causing pain for no reason. Rather, Divine 'punishments' are ways in which God communicates with us, alluding to us that we should change our ways in specific areas. Thus, even when good tidings occur it is wise to observe any negative aspects to the outcome of the good news to discern if there are any underlying messages within the reward, as was the case with the *tzaraat* on the houses.

A second, more specific message relates to our attitude to acquiring possessions and money. The *tzaraat* on the houses teach us that too much effort in the realm of the physical world is fruitless. This is all the more so the case with dishonest or stingy behavior. A person must realize that there are '*harbeh sheluchim leMakom*'; that God can provide us with whatever we need in the most creative of fashions, including through discovering treasure in the walls of our homes!

“The Kohen shall go forth to the outside of the camp; the Kohen shall look, and behold, the tzaraas affliction had been healed from the metzora” (14:3)

Why does it say “the tzaraas affliction had been healed from the leper?” Who else would it be healed from? The Alshich writes that tzaraas comes as a punishment for loshon hara and other sins. Until he recognizes what he has done wrong and attempts to do teshuva and correct his sin, his tzaraas will not go away. This is the intention of the posuk. The tzaraas has to be healed from one who recognizes himself as a metzora and as one who has done wrong and has repented. Only then will the tzaraas be healed, when he sees himself as person with tzaraas.

“The person being purified shall immerse his clothing, shave off all his hair, and immerse himself in the water and become pure; thereafter he may enter the camp, but he shall dwell outside of his tent for seven days” (14:8)

Chazal explain that the prohibition to enter “his tent” means that he is forbidden to be with his wife for those seven days between the initial purification that allows him to re-enter the camp and the final purification process that takes place in the Mikdash. R’ Samson Raphael Hirsch comments that there is an important lesson contained in this halacha. A person is only able to enjoy his own home and all of its benefits as long as he does not interfere with the harmony in the homes of others. A metzora, who cause strife and distance between husband and wife or between friends, may not fully enjoy his own home until his purification process is complete, even though he is allowed back into the camp. Only after his sins that caused such divisiveness have been fully cleansed is he entitled to full use of his own home.

“If he is poor and his means are not sufficient, then he shall take one male lamb as a guilt offering for a wave-service to provide atonement for him; and one tenth-ephah of fine flour mixed with oil for a meal-offering, and a measure of oil” (14:21)

The Chofetz Chaim uses the different sacrifices prescribed for a poor man and a rich man as a lesson regarding the expectations that Hashem has from people with different abilities. Just as the rich metzora cannot fulfill his obligation with the poor metzora’s sacrifice, people who are rich with abilities cannot look at their peers with lesser abilities and comfort themselves that they are better than the others. Although they may think that they are better, this is not necessarily so because they may not be living up to their capabilities. More is expected of a person with more talents. Every individual is held to their own standard. Comparing oneself to others serves no purpose. The bottom line is that a person should strive to be all that he can be. That is what Hashem expects of him and nothing less.

“And the one to whom the house belongs comes and tells the kohen, saying: Something like a lesion has appeared to me in the house” (14:35)

This week’s parshiyos teach the laws of different types of tzara’as. Chazal tell us that Hashem did not immediately punish a person with tzara’as on his body, but first put tzaraas on his house as a warning. If the person did not heed the divine message, then tzara’as would be found on his clothing. If the person still persisted in his evil ways, only then would Hashem send tzara’as on his body. However, the Torah does not go through the laws in this sequence, but instead introduces them in the reverse order: first outlining the laws of tzara’as on the body, then for clothing, and finally for the house. Why is the order in the Torah the opposite of what would happen in reality? Rabbeinu Bachya explains that the ways of the Torah are pleasant and that the Torah does not want to portray a series of progressively harsher punishments. Instead it starts with the harshest punishment and then segues to lighter punishments. The Torah does not wish to be affiliated with punishment and even when it must, it presents it in a nicer way. The order in which tzara’as actually happened is instructive for us. It is important to remember that Hashem is not interested in causing people pain and so He often sends messages from a distance as a wake-up call before it is too late and a harsher punishment must be delivered. R’ Dovid Feinstein points out that the word “nega,” “affliction,” has the same letters as the word “oneg,” “pleasure.” If a person is unaware that he is going in the wrong direction, he will keep going down that path without realizing that he is going to end up in trouble. The wake-up call provided by Hashem’s message alerts a person to the fact that he is headed down the wrong path. The realization that he has the ability to change course and turn things around is a great pleasure.

By Rabbi Mayer Friedman

Theoretical Torah

By Sheldon Stern

It's time to play, "Jewish Jeopardy" with your host Zev Brenner. We have a great show tonight. Chaim Wakshlag is trying to become a five time champion. You have the board Chaim so let's start. Thanks Zev, I'll take Rabbi Moshe Plutchok quotes for \$200. "It's the greatest single act performed by Moshe Rabbeinu." Yes Chaim. "He broke the Luchos." I'm sorry Chaim. What are you talking about? I've heard Rabbi Plutchok say that a dozen times. You're right, but remember your answer must be in the form of a question. So let's ask why breaking the Luchos stands out among all of our leader's sterling achievements. Moshe earned the moniker of Eved Hashem. Our immediate reaction is that he followed orders to a tee. No, not at all. Moshe reached simpatico with Hashem to the point that he could intuit the Creator's wishes. Therefore he, was, by no means, a "yes" man. Chazal tell us that from Moshe Rabbeinu's time no one arose like Moshe Ben Maimon. This is generally viewed as a testament to the latter's genius and single minded devotion to the Torah. Based on this week's Parsha perhaps there's another element to consider.

In 1989, David, a periodontist, gave me the entire set of Meam Loez seforim as a way of saying thanks for having referred patients to him. That gift was instrumental in advancing my spiritual odyssey. I recall a statement from the author, Rav Yaakov Culi, regarding the end of Parshas Vayishlach. Found therein are the names of Eisav's descendants. Good to know if you want to star at Jewish Jeopardy but seemingly not worth much else. The Sefardi giant noted that there's a treasure trove of information in those names for those who have mastered esoteric Judaism. Similarly, for many, Parshas Tazria and Metzora, which are usually read together, are little more than bumps in the road, but that's due to our limited understanding of such material. For Rambam there was no such deficit and so he made a remarkable statement. The order of Tzaraas, as found in the two Parshas, is that the person's body is afflicted first, followed by his clothing and finally his house, but when the codifier of Jewish law taught these subjects he reversed the order starting instead, with Tzaraas of the house. So how do we explain this dramatic change? First, let's look at the order in the Torah. When we're introduced to Tzaraas as kids we're simplistically told that the person gets some skin lesion for speaking Loshon Hora and if he doesn't correct his ways then it goes to his clothing and finally to his house. It sounds nice, but there are some difficulties to deal with. At the end of the discussion regarding tzaraas of the house the Torah makes a broad, all-encompassing statement, "Zos Toras" etc. linking the three types of afflictions. This then signals that Parshas Metzora is moving in a different direction as it then teaches the laws of the Zav and other types of Tumah. But here's the problem. In Tazria, when the discussion of clothing Tzaraas was completed, it also said Zos Toras. Moreover, the same terminology was used after describing the purification process of one who was physically stricken. If, as we posited, the three types are on a continuum, then seemingly it would have sufficed to say Zos Toras Nega Tzaras at the end, in order to put a bow on it. Perhaps, by reversing the order Rambam is alerting us to the fact that the subject is by no means, simple. To that point let's factor in Rashi's comment on tzaraas of houses. He doesn't mention punishments of any sort. Rather, our foremost commentator noted that this was a positive omen. When those houses were razed great fortunes were found, having been abandoned by the Canaanites. It seems then, that simply connecting Tzaraas and Loshon Hora isn't a viable model.

So what does this all mean? Frankly, I really don't know. When I took Organic Chemistry some fifty years ago the professor explained that all or most reactions are catalyzed by "free radicals." He remarked that such molecules can't be isolated, and, in fact, they probably don't exist, but we need to rely on them to explain the reactions. I understand now that the professor was simply restating Dovid Hamelech's axiom, "His greatness can't be investigated." The Gemara in Bava Kamma tells us that man is a searcher. We're trying to discover the truth, but we'll never actually find it. Still this shouldn't deter us. As we entered the 20th century, the physics community declared that all was known. Then along came quantum theory to turn that science on its ear. So now we deal with theoretical physics and the recognition that the more we learn the more we realize how little we know. And the same applies in the world of Torah. We should all be familiar with the story of Rav Shimon Haamsuni. He tried to expound all the "Eessim" of the Torah, but when he came upon one verse that he couldn't explain, he abandoned his work. The Tanna understood that close only counts in horseshoes and hand grenades but not when deciphering Hashem's work. There, it's all or nothing at all. That's why I'm offended, to put it mildly, by Rabbi Miller's attempt to attribute the Holocaust to Chillul Shabbos. But now I have a confession to make. Years ago I was religiously right wingish. Par example (I always love to show off my French) I labeled Rabbi Slifkin a Kofer in the Jewish Press and I thought that Professor Schroeder, who posited hominids as man's precursors, was an atheist. I hereby admit that I was wrong on both counts and let me explain. As I noted above, I don't believe that it's possible to explain G-d's creation, be it with the conventional "six day 5784" model, or by introducing evolution and speculating that the world is ~ 15, billion years old. I have no problem with those who are partial to either paradigm, but with two caveats. First, one must believe that Hashem is the force that caused everything to come into existence. Second, he can't nullify the other view as invalid. As I mentioned above, just about 100 years ago physicists thought they could there was nothing left to discover. To their credit, however, they didn't stop investigating and so an explosion of new, truthful ideas resulted. Those who insist on "six days, 5784" stifle any open discussion and this is untenable in science and in Torah.

Earlier in this piece, I praised Rambam's penchant for "out-of-the-box" thinking. But his greatness doesn't stop there. He said something along the following, "I have a certain way of understanding the Torah, but if it was proven to me that I'm wrong, I would simply develop a new model." But I'd like to add something. Quite often Rashi comments on why he explained a subject in a certain way, "If I did it the other way the reader will be confused." Truth be told, I rarely have any idea of what he's actually saying. And that brings me to Rav Chaim Zimmerman ZTL. I mentioned Rav Yaakov Culi above. He's greatly underappreciated. So is Rabbi Zimmerman. I was told about him by my friend Walter Levy who described him as follows, "He can argue Tosafos with Feinstein and physics with Einstein." About twenty years ago Walter lent me Rabbi Zimmerman's Sefer, "Torah and Reason." Throughout the book, Rabbi Zimmerman routinely suggested skipping sections because one needed to be fluent in Kabbalah to have any appreciation of what was being said. So what did I get out of the Sefer? Just this one point. Rabbi Zimmerman said that science is about measurements $E = MC^2$ immediately comes to mind. But then he said that the same applies in the spiritual world, it's the Amah, the Reviis etc. It's not just about Rabbis arguing how much wine to drink for the Seder they're discussing essential truths that govern the world. This made me realize how little I know, but gave me hope that someday I'll learn some of these secrets. Yes, Rabbi Zimmerman was a singular genius, but what stands out about him is something Walter once told me, "Rabbi Zimmerman said that his dream is to be able to understand one point made by a Rishon." That's a Rishon mind you not an Amora and surely not a Tanna. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of thinking that since we live in a technological age that we're intellectually superior to those who came before. We started with a teaching from Rabbi Plutchok, so let's end with another, "I don't know what's right but I know what's wrong." What's wrong is convincing oneself that he's right. To that point the wisest of all men said, "There is more hope for a fool than for one who is wise in his own eyes." Last Motzi Shabbos, three Lubavichers were guests on Zev Brenner's radio program. They're part of a group that's pushing the Rebbe is Moshiach envelope. The "proofs" they advanced were specious and infantile. They're guilty of violating the aphorism, "Don't tell me the facts, because my mind is made up." A rabbi whose name I don't recall said, "Who would want to believe in a G-d he can understand?" Hashem created us with limitations. All He wants from us is our devotion.

What Happens When You Transform Your Enemy

By Chana Weisberg

As a parent, it's your greatest moment of triumph. You've momentarily left the playroom. Your son begins to taunt his older sister. You're about to rush in as referee to prevent the impending battle, when you pleasantly discover that your daughter hasn't taken the bait. Instead of fighting back, retorting angrily or using her fists, she chooses a different response. She calmly explains to her brother—mimicking the soothing voice you try so hard to use—that she loves him too much to fight, and then distracts him with another activity. Weeks, months and years of effective parenting have paid off! Your child has internalized your values.

This Shabbat before Pesach is called Shabbat Hagadol, the "Great Shabbat." After eight decades of being victim to the Egyptians' merciless cruelty, on the 10th of Nissan, on Shabbat, the Israelites prepare a paschal lamb. They explain to the Egyptians that G-d instructed them to offer a sacrifice on the 14th of Nissan—the night of their redemption, and the night that G-d would slay all the Egyptian firstborn. Hearing this, the Egyptian firstborn plead with Pharaoh to liberate the Jews. When Pharaoh refuses, they rise up in an armed revolt. Many Egyptians died in battle.

This revolt was titled a "great miracle," and it is commemorated every year on the Shabbat before Passover. These Egyptian firstborn finally understood the folly of their evil and sided with Moses, actively attacking their own government. Chassidic thought explains that the greatest victory is not in fighting evil, but rather transforming it into good. When the enemy becomes a friend and defender . . . When a negative inclination works energetically for good . . . When darkness is changed into light . . . When destruction becomes the impetus for building . . . And, when a powerful group of firstborn sons finally stands up against the ills of their society by defending those whom they had so wrongly mistreated.

Interestingly, the 10th of Nissan also marks the date of Miriam's *yahrtzeit*, years later, after the Exodus. From a young age, Miriam fearlessly stood up against King Pharaoh when he instructed her to kill all the Jewish male newborns. Despite the hardships, despite the pain, one woman fanned the flame of faith of all the Jewish women of her generation, and succeeded in transforming their perspective with her courage and kindness.

This Shabbat is also called the "great" Shabbat because the *haftorah* speaks of the coming of Moshiach, referring to this day as the *yom Hashem hagadol v'hanora*, the "great" and awesome day of the L-rd (Malachi 3:23).

This great and utopian era will not be a time of destruction, but of transformation; it will not be about commanding, but about communicating. It will not be about fighting, but about educating and changing the mindset of our foes, just as the perspective of the firstborns was positively altered. May *this* week's great Shabbat finally usher in this great and awesome time period!