

Parsha Bo: The Last Plague

By Rabbi Noah Weinberg

Bo (Exodus 10:1-13:16)

God said to Moshe, "One more plague shall I bring upon Pharaoh and upon Egypt; after that he shall send you forth from here..."

It was at midnight that Hashem smote every firstborn in the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne to the firstborn of the captive who was in the dungeon, and every firstborn animal. (Shemos 11:1, 12:29)

God tells Moshe, "This is it. I will strike down every firstborn of the land of Egypt, from the firstborn of Pharaoh until the firstborn of the foreign captive that sits in jail." "Kol bechor – every firstborn" implies that even if there was a tourist or temporary resident from a different nation who was a firstborn or had a firstborn son, he died as well. (See Rashi, 12:29) And the Torah specifies that the firstborn of a prisoner of war was also killed in this final plague.

Rashi asks: Where is the fairness in killing the firstborn of a captive? Why should he die? He had nothing to do with enslaving the Jews. He was also one of the prisoners of Pharaoh.

Rashi gives two reasons, which means that both factors were necessary. One, these captives rejoiced at the suffering of the Jews. Two, so they would not say, "It was our gods who brought this punishment upon the Egyptians." So we can understand why the firstborn captives were killed as well. But Rashi does not include in his explanation why the firstborn of the temporary resident, the fellow from a foreign country who was living in Egypt, was killed. It seems that there was a different justification for killing him, even though he wasn't part of the government persecuting the Jews. What did he do wrong?

The answer is obvious, which is why Rashi did not bother to state it. You cannot be a tourist or a temporary resident in a country that is committing genocide. If you stay there, even if you are not actively involved, you are condoning the atrocity and are a part of it.

The captive in jail cannot get out. He is stuck there, so Rashi needs to explain the justification for killing his firstborn. But there is no need to explain why the temporary resident's firstborn is killed. How can he live in a country that is persecuting another nation? His silence means he is party to the crime.

There is no difference whether you're doing something actively or you're tacitly condoning it. As Edmund Burke famously said, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing." According to intelligence services there are 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, of which 15-25% seek the destruction of the West. The remaining 75-85% of the Muslim population

consists of peace-loving people, but that is irrelevant if they remain silent. It is the murderous radicals who drive the agenda, as Nazi Germany painfully testifies. When the majority is complacent, they are complicit to terror. They must take an active stance against violence.

Saving the Jewish Firstborn

If the Almighty was bringing a plague to kill the firstborn of the Egyptians, why did the Children of Israel have to take measures to ensure that their firstborn would not be killed?

Speak to the entire assembly of Israel, saying: On the tenth of this month they shall take for themselves – each man – a lamb or kid for each father's house... They shall take some of its blood and place it on the two doorposts and on the lintel of the houses in which they will eat it... The blood shall be a sign for you upon the houses where you are; when I shall see the blood and I shall pass over you; there shall not be a plague of destruction upon you when I strike in the land of Egypt.
(ibid 12:3, 7, 13)

Without the blood from the Pesach Offering on their doorposts, the firstborn of the Jews would have been killed as well. Why? The Jews were the ones being persecuted! God was coming to save them. You need to have a reason to kill the firstborn of the captive; they enjoyed the persecution of the Jews or they would have said that their idols were the ones who did this. But the Jews were God's people. They certainly did not enjoy their own persecution, and they knew it was Hashem doing all these miracles. So why did they have to put blood on their doorposts in order for the Almighty to skip over their homes and for them to remain unscathed by this plague? What did the Jews do wrong?

When you ask God to judge someone, you are judged first – even if you are in the right. “Rav Chanan said: Whoever submits judgment to his fellow [to Heaven], he is punished [for his own sins] first” (Bava Kamma 93a). If you want justice served, you are asking Hashem to hold back his trait of mercy and stand in judgment. In that case, you need to be ready to bear the scrutiny of that justice, because Hashem will examine your actions first.

When you call out to God and plead for mercy, you are appealing to His trait of kindness and forbearance. That becomes the reality of your relationship to God. But when you say, "God, look at what they are doing to me!" your relationship becomes one based on justice, and just as Hashem will judge your persecutor, so, too, He will judge you. If you fiercely criticize people for being wrong, then you believe that people's mistakes are their responsibility. That means you have accepted that your mistakes are your complete responsibility; otherwise you'd be a hypocrite.

Because justice was being meted out against the Jewish people's Egyptian oppressors, the Jews themselves were also subject to Hashem's judgment.

Like One Man with One Heart

This is an important lesson to take to heart. All too often we look at other people's mistakes with a fierce eye. We lack compassion and tolerance; we ignore the mitigating circumstances that help to explain why someone would make such a mistake. We refuse to see that deep down, others want to do the right thing and grow just as much as we do. They want to be kind. They want to share. They want to help. It's just that they're making a mistake; they're stuck in a box. Instead of understanding them, we condemn and create disunity, which weakens the foundation of our nation.

In the process, we also hurt ourselves, because by judging others, we are asking for judgment on ourselves. If you cannot tolerate someone else's mistake, the Almighty will not tolerate your mistake.

And our judgmentalism not only creates a barrier between ourselves and our brothers, it creates a barrier between us and Hashem, and drives away the Shechinah, the presence of the Almighty. This is the cause of our destruction.

At Sinai the Jewish people were united. "Vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar – And Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain" (Shemos 19:2). The word "vayichan – encamped" is written in the singular; the nation became ke'ish echad belev echad, like one man with one purpose. When that happens, God leaves the heavens and communicates with us. That was Mount Sinai.

By uniting with other Jews, we can unleash the power of the Jewish people. But we have to overcome our cursed tendency to judge others and to be critical and intolerant. The genius of the Jewish people is within us, right here waiting to change the world. And we've seen glimpses of it, such as when much of the Jewish world united in 1948 to fulfill the dream of coming back to our land, to build our own nation.

But we are divided by senseless hate, endless criticism, and constant infighting, which undermines our potential for greatness.

What is the answer? Ke'ish echad belev echad, like one man with one heart: to always keep in mind our ultimate purpose and vision, the unifying goal that brings us together "to perfect the universe under the Almighty's sovereignty."

When we keep focused on the bigger goal, we can rise above our pettiness and mean-spiritedness. We can learn to be forgiving and give the benefit of the doubt, to hold back our judgment and criticism. If we focus on our common vision, our power is unlimited, because we will have tapped into God's unceasing energy and merited His presence. This will enable us to succeed far beyond our expectations and dreams.