

NEFESH
SHIMSHONDIVREI TORAH ON THE WEEKLY PARSHA AND HOLIDAYS FROM
THE TEACHINGS OF RABBEINU SHIMSHON DOVID PINCUS ZT"lTHIS PUBLICATION IS DEDICATED TO THE HATZLACHAH AND ZECHUS OF נחמה ויעקב בן רחל נחמה
MAY THEY GROW TO BE TALMIDEI CHACHAMIM AND OVDEI HASHEM.PEARLS OF WISDOM
FROM THE PARSHAHThe Long Road to
Makas Bechoros

וְהִפִּיתִי כָּל בְּכוֹר בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם. (שמות יב, יב)

I will smite every firstborn in the land of Egypt. (*Shemos* 12:12)

The reason why *Hashem* sent *Moshe Rabbeinu* was to bring the Jewish people out of Egypt. But there was a certain obstacle that needed to be overcome: Pharaoh didn't agree. This led to what seems to be an unnecessarily long and drawn-out process.

Moshe comes to Pharaoh and talks to him. Pharaoh claims he never heard of *Hashem* and doesn't see why he should obey Him. Then Pharaoh decides that the Jews are spending too much time talking about nonsense, so he increases their work burden.

After that, *Hashem* commands Moshe to start making *makos*. The Nile turns to blood, but Pharaoh doesn't agree to let the people go. Then come the frogs, the lice, the wild beasts, etc etc, all to no avail.

Then it was time for *makas bechoros*. *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* Himself came and smote the firstborn of Egypt: "I, and not an angel. I, and not a *seraph*."

Hashem alone brought His people out of Egypt.

So what need was there for the whole long introduction? Moshe brought nine *makos* on

Pharaoh, and it didn't help anything, so what was the point?

There is a proper way to do things in the world and that is how it was done in Egypt. First we need to do everything we are capable of towards achieving the desired result. Only then, *Hashem* brings the *yeshu'ah* Himself. In the words of the *Mesilas Yeshtarim*, "It begins with *histadlus* and ends with a gift."¹ This is the order that *Hashem* set.

And it is a basic principle in *avodas Hashem*.

The matter of *kedushah* has two parts. First is the work, and in the end is the reward. It begins with *histadlus* and ends with a gift.

This means that first a person needs to sanctify himself, and in the end, he will be sanctified by Heaven. This is as *Chazal*

¹ *Mesilas Yeshtarim* ch. 26.

said: "If a person sanctifies himself a little, Heaven will sanctify him a lot. If he sanctifies himself here below, he will be sanctified from above^{2,3}."

Hashem instructed Moshe to perform *makah* after *makah* and do everything that can be done. Then *Hashem* Himself brought the *yeshu'ah*. ●

2 Yoma 39a.

3 Mesilas Yescharim *ibid*.

Important Details

וּלְמַעַן תִּסְפָּר בְּאָזְנֵי בְנֶךָ וּבֶן בְּנֶךָ אֵת אֲשֶׁר הִתְעַלְלֹתִי בְּמִצְרַיִם. (שמות י, ב)

So that you will recount to your son and your son's son how I made a joke out of Egypt. (*Shemos* 10:2)

Why do we need to describe to our children the plagues that came upon Egypt? What will our children gain from knowing that the *Mitzrim* underwent this *makah* and that *makah*, and how much it hurt them? What is the point of all this detail?

The same question applies to *Kri'as Yam Suf*. The Torah goes into such elaboration:

The chariots of Pharaoh and his army were thrown in the sea, and his best men were drowned in the Sea of Reeds. The depths covered them, they went down to the bottom like a stone....¹

What benefit do we get from knowing exactly

how they drowned?

When the wicked are punished and destroyed, it is not just a matter of retribution, that they got what they deserved. The elimination of the *resha'im* affects us as well.

Because if the Egyptians would still be alive until this day, their impure ways and mores would have such a strong influence on our *mitzvah* observance that we would not even be able to eat *matzah* on Pesach night.

The non-Jews persecute and seek to destroy the Jewish people, and above all, in spiritual matters. They are the source of our troubles.

Does this imply that we would all be *tzaddikim*, if not for the evil influence of the nations around us? Yes.

1 *Shemos* 16:4-5.

לעילוי נשמות

מוה"ד משה בן אליעזר המבורגר זצ"ל

ומוה"ד ברוך זאב בן נפתלי קראוס זצ"ל

נרבת נבדיהם ~ עשרת זקנים בני בנים ותפארת בני אבותם

ועמך כולם צדיקים – Your people are all
tzaddikim.²

All the sins that the Jewish people committed, from day one, were all because of the spirit of *tumah* that influenced them, and this impure spirit came from the other nations. This matter is deeply rooted in the soul of the world and expresses itself practically in the natural course of events.

Every elimination of the wicked and of the power of non-Jewish *tumah* is vitally important to us. It

² *Yeshayahu* 60:21.

gets rid of their bad influence on us.

This is why each and every detail of the punishment of the *resha'im* is worthy of mention. Every little detail is part of the elimination of the wicked and their impurity which would harm us greatly and stop us from serving *Hashem* if they still existed.

Every stage in the *Eser Makos*, each detail of how the Egyptians drowned in the Sea, is about another bit of wickedness and impurity that *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* destroyed and neutralized, for our great benefit. ●

PARSHA TOPIC

The Critical Point

הַחֹדֶשׁ הַזֶּה לָכֶם רֵאשׁ חֳדָשִׁים רֵאשׁוֹן הוּא לָכֶם לְחֹדֶשֵׁי הַשָּׁנָה: (שמות יב, ב)

This month shall be for you the head of months; it shall be for you the first of the year's months. (*Shemos* 12:2)

Where It All Starts

The *mitzvah* to declare *rosh chodesh* is the first *mitzvah* the Jewish people were given, as Rashi famously points out at the very beginning of *Chumash Bereishis*. And there is a general rule that the beginning enfolds within it everything that is to come.

This brings us to the question, what is so special and fundamental about the *mitzvah* of declaring *rosh chodesh*? Since it is the first of all the *mitzvos*; it is the beginning of *Yetzias Mitzrayim*, it must bear a special message.

Pesach is Birth

We have explained at length, elsewhere, that the period of Egyptian bondage was like the period of

pregnancy for the Jewish people, and the exodus from Egypt was like the Jewish people's birth. This means that on Pesach we, too, are to be born, so to speak. A Jew needs to become a new person on Pesach.

This brings us to the question of what a "person" is.

The first thing we need to know is that the scientific definition of a human being is ridiculous. It posits that "homo sapiens" are a type of animal with an exceptionally high IQ. But the truth is that human beings are not smart animals. They are not a horse of another color. They are a different kind of creature altogether.

So what does define a human being? A human is a creature that has the capability to attach to *Hashem*. And how is this attachment achieved? Naturally

speaking, by thinking constantly about *Hashem*, as the Rambam writes:

The power of intellect that *Hashem* bestowed upon us is that which attaches us to Him.¹

This expresses itself primarily by speaking to Him, because speech is connection. We speak to *Hashem* by means of Torah learning or *Tefilah*. This is the activity of “the living soul,”² the נפש חיה that human beings have, which is translated by Onkelos as “the speaking spirit.” It says in the *Zohar* that this speaking is Torah learning and *Tefilah*. By speaking with *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* through Torah and prayer, a person becomes a “living soul.” This is the true definition of a human being. [It is the Divine point of connection to G-d – facilitated by speech – that is the essential point of humanity within us, as will be explained below.]

The Critical Point of Choice

The essential point of humanity within us is actually our freedom of choice.

What is freedom of choice, otherwise known as free will? People commonly think of it as the ability to choose between yes and no. We are presented with two options and can go with only one of them. We are wavering, vacillating, trying to make up our mind. For instance, will I go to learn Torah now, or not? This is indeed part of the concept of free choice, but it is not the deeper aspect of it. In Torah sources, free choice is called דעת or הכרעה, “knowledge” or “decision.” This describes the more profound level of free choice, the true free choice, which is actually the Divine point within us.

In the blessing over the *Haftarah* we recite אשר אחר בנביאים טובים – “He chose good prophets....” The word “chose” is employed. What does it mean that *Hashem* “chose” good prophets?

It of course doesn't mean that *Hashem* was in

doubt whether to place His *Shechinah* upon good prophets or bad prophets, and in the end He chose the good ones. Similarly, it says in our *Yom Tov* prayers: אתה בחרתנו מכל העמים – “You chose us from among all the nations.” This doesn't mean that *Hashem* was deliberating whether to choose the Jews or the Chinese, and in the end He decided to take the Jews. Rather, *Hashem* chose good prophets, and He chose Yisrael, absolutely and resolutely. It's a different kind of choice.

In the same way, a human being has the power of free choice. He can choose absolutely what he is and what he wants in life. We will explain what this means.

Nowadays, if a child exhibits violent behavior, the mother hurries to take him for psychological evaluation and perhaps treatment. She wants the psychologist to diagnose why her child behaves that way. What do modern psychologists tend to say? “The child is not to blame. When he was young, he was treated in a manner that caused him to develop a violent personality. The emotional damage that was done to him in his childhood is exhibiting itself in his present behavior.”

Then the mother says, “So I am to blame?” The psychologist replies, “No, you are not to blame, either. It's your parents....”

According to this approach, no one is ever to blame, because a person's behavior is just a link in a chain of reactions, and every reaction has a cause, and every cause has another cause that preceded it, and the buck stops nowhere. Accordingly, a person is not responsible for his actions and cannot be blamed for them. Human beings are like computers whose output is determined by the data that was fed in.

This is the prevalent approach today. It is part of the outlook that human beings are animals with greater intelligence.

What does the Torah say?

There is such a thing as a chain reaction in human behavior, but there is a starting point of absolute free choice that has no prior cause. This starting point is *yesh me'ayin*.

1 *Moreh Nevuchim* 3:51.

2 *Bereishis* 2:7.

Hakadosh Baruch Hu gives us the ability to choose, and we choose between good and evil. We cannot conceptualize this or understand it, because this starting point of absolute choice is a Divine point. A person makes this choice without a prior cause. *Yesh me'ayin*. And this is what defines him as a human being.

The Month of Choice

This is the deeper meaning of the *mitzvah* to declare *rosh chodesh*. When the new moon first appears, *beis din* declares that the new month has begun. The moon represents the Jewish people, and the sun represents *Hashem*. (Just as the moon receives its light from the sun, so the Jewish people receive from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*. We explained this idea more at length, elsewhere.)

The first contact that the moon makes with the sun is by the moon turning in the direction of the sun and receiving light from it. This is the *molad*, the “birth” and first appearance of the new moon. The same applies to the Jewish people and *Hashem*. When Jews choose to turn toward *Hashem*, this is the point of “birth.” This is a very deep and Divine point. It is a matter of *yesh me'ayin*, of *tzelem Elokim*. This point is so subtle that no one in the world sees it and senses it. But it is the essential point of humanity. It is where everything begins.

What does a person choose between?

He has two choices: *Hashem* or *avodah zarah*.

We know what choosing *Hashem* is. But what is choosing *avodah zarah*? Let's say a simple-minded person is asked what life is all about and what he seeks. He answers: “I want a pleasant life. I don't want pain and suffering; I don't want to struggle with debts. I do want satisfaction from the children. Basically, I want to have a good, peaceful life.”

Is this so terrible? Is this comparable to *avodah zarah*?

Yet, *Chazal* say:

לא יהיה בך אל זר ולא תשתחוה לאל
נָכַר – “There shall not be in you a strange
god, you shall not prostrate yourself to a

foreign god.”³ What “strange god” is there in a person's body? It is the *yetzer hara*.⁴

This tells us that a person whose life is all about having it good and seeking pleasure, however kosher that pleasure may be, is serving a strange god within him. Such a person identifies with his *yetzer hara* and serves its desires.

What a person really should choose is a life that is all about being connected to *Hashem*. He should see that as his essence and his self. Biologically speaking, the part of a human being that is responsible for making this choice is above, in his head, in his brain. This is the place of *tefillin*. The *tefillin* on a person's head, above, at the place of the brain, represent that a person's true essence is his attachment to *Hashem*.

A human being's true essence is to connect his beginning point, which is his deepest place, to *Hashem*. This is the attachment to *Hashem*, the *deveikus* to *Hashem*, that we spoke of above. And it is the deeper meaning of, “This month shall be for you” – החודש הזה לכם. It is the true starting point, the true beginning, to which there was no prior cause. This is represented by the first appearance of the new moon, the *molad*, as explained above.

To explain it in different terms, this first choice is called *bechorah*, “firstborn,” because a person needs to decide what he prefers, what he places first. The Jewish people were born at the very moment of *Makas Bechoros*. This choice of “*bechorah*,” this point of one's essential self, which is also called ראשית אוני, “first strength,” is what we attained at *Yetzias Mitzrayim*. [That was when *Hashem* chose us as His “firstborn.” And we, too, choose Him and place Him “first.”]

Get In the Right Direction

Life begins with a decision. We need to decide what we really want, what direction we are going. It

³ *Tehillim* 81:10.

⁴ *Shabbos* 105b.

is a very subtle and difficult point, but this where we need to begin. החודש הזה לכם – “This month shall be for you...”

This is what we learn from *rosh chodesh*. This is what *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* indicated to us through the *mitzvah* of declaring *rosh chodesh*. There is almost nothing yet at that first point, at the beginning. At the point of the moon’s “birth” it is barely even visible because it is so slight. However, all we need to do is direct ourselves to *Hashem*, for Whom the sun serves as a metaphor. Some people might belittle this initial choice of direction. It is such a small, almost imperceptible point.

But if we get ourselves facing the right direction, it’s just a matter of time until big things develop from it. In another fifteen days, the moon will already be full. On the 15th of the month, we will go out of Egypt by *Hashem’s* strong hand, or we will dwell in the *sukkah* together with *Hashem*.

But there is another thing we need to know. Indeed, in another fifteen days the moon will be full. Then we will already have eaten our *matzah* and *maror*, or already have gone out to dwell in the *sukkah*. If at that point we turn to another direction, away from *Hashem* – like the full moon that starts to turn away from the sun, and begins to wane – in another half a month we will be back to nothing.

The waxing and waning of the moon is an allegory. It is about the story of our life. The message is that a person’s current state is not the critical factor. He might be virtually nothing right now, but if he gets himself facing in the right direction, he will grow and grow like the moon. At *rosh chodesh* the moon is a nothing. Then it becomes a quarter-moon, and then a half-moon, and eventually it becomes a full moon.

And the converse is true. A person might be at a spiritual height. But if he starts to feel satiated

and self-satisfied, and wants to taste a little bit of this world’s pleasure, if he is turning ever-so-slightly away from *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, it is only a matter of time. Like the waning moon, he will dwindle down to nothing.

This is the meaning of the Torah’s first *mitzvah*: we need to turn toward *Hashem*. This is the Torah’s “starting point.”

Created to Enjoy

This act of turning to *Hashem* takes place at the deepest point in a human being. And this point has to do with enjoyment, with pleasure. It says in *Mesilas Yesarim*⁵ that “human beings were created only in order to take pleasure,” but it then goes on to explain that a person is faced with a choice. He needs to choose whether he wants “to take pleasure in *Hashem* and enjoy the radiance of His Presence, which is the true pleasure and the greatest enjoyment,” or to find pleasure in the pursuit of “material desires, by which he distances himself from the true good.”

Turning toward *Hashem* is about where we look for pleasure. Do we seek our pleasure in the *beis midrash*, or somewhere else?

The constant search after taking pleasure in *Hashem*, after enjoying closeness to *Hakadosh Baruch Hu*, after tasting His sweetness, is the true turning toward *Hashem*. This is the deepest point of free choice. Here is the fundamental difference between “the firstborn of Egypt” and “the firstborn of Yisrael.” This is the first point of Pesach: קִדַּשׁ לִי כָּל בְּכוֹר – “Sanctify to Me all the firstborn.”⁶

This is why the *pasuk* emphasizes, “This month shall be for **you**...” It is for you, because here is where you need to choose which direction you want to face. ●

5 Ch. 1.

6 *Shemos* 13:2.