

Sparks Amidst the Darkness

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This week, we begin the study of Seder Shemos, recounting the story of Yaakov's descendants in Mitzrayim. First, we learn of their subjugation and servitude, followed by their eventual freedom and redemption. Finally, we see how they became a nation at Har Sinai and the construction of the Mishkon.

The era of the avos has ended, and now the era of their children, the Bnei Yisroel, begins. After a rough start, they ultimately rise to the expectations placed upon them and earn the Torah, the mitzvos, and a profound connection to Hashem.

Jews are often compared to the moon, going through periods of contraction and darkness, which are always followed by periods of remarkable rejuvenation and growth. This has been the case since our earliest days in Mitzrayim, and it remains true today. Not so long ago, we were decimated and nearly lost, yet slowly but steadily, we have surged back, and in many ways, we are stronger than ever.

In Lakewood alone, there are some 40,000 children in elementary schools, 4,500 talmidei chachomim studying Maseches Yevamos in Bais Medrash Govoah and many thousands more than in the past millennium learning all the masechtos of Shas there. This doesn't even account for what's happening in other cities and towns across the United States, in Eretz Yisroel, and around the world.

It all began with the freed slaves who emerged from Mitzrayim and stood at Har Sinai. We have come a long way since then, though we are still in golus, struggling to find our place. Many of us continue to do our best, and always at the forefront of our minds is the deep yearning to return home to Eretz Yisroel.

He Fought for His Family Until His Last Breath—Now They're Fighting to Stay Afloat
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Rabbi Shmuel, father of 15, endured a long battle with severe illness. Despite his suffering, he continued to care for his family. They lived in extreme poverty. Sadly, his illness took his life. His family now faces an immense challenge. Please support them during this difficult time. Every donation counts. ...

Yerushalayim calls to us, even as we have learned to live in golus. In our hearts, we know that we do not truly belong here, and we understand how easily the good days can come to an abrupt end. We know we are meant to be separate, holy, living on a higher plane, and following in the footsteps of our great-grandparents who led lives of physical simplicity and spiritual

greatness. With mesirus nefesh, they steadfastly refused to deviate from the teachings of their parents and teachers, despite the cost.

In the modern era, it has become difficult to live as they did and to keep future generations on the path of modesty, self-restraint, innocence, and virtue. Torah flourishes all around us, but we need it to grow within us as well.

We can only achieve this by dedicating ourselves to Torah study, learning Gemara with its meforshim, Rishonim, and Acharonim, and studying classic sifrei mussar, which serve to elevate, purify, and ground us.

When we study the weekly parsha, reviewing and striving to understand the eternal words and lessons of the pesukim, they remind us of who we are meant to be. The lessons are clear, laid out for us and reinforced week after week by our rabbeim and rabbonim, who educate us on what our priorities should be. The lessons of the weekly sedrah remind us of where we came from, how we should behave, and what we should strive for. Through them, we can find success and fulfillment, achieving the goals and purposes that the Creator has set for us.

By studying the parsha each week and nurturing our neshamos through limud haTorah, we are kept grounded in a world where fiction often masquerades as truth and people put more effort into appearances than into true achievement.

It doesn't take a genius to recognize the corruption and incompetence that reign around the world. Yet, millions of people see what we see, and time and time again, they elect leaders who embody those very qualities. They vote for candidates whose platforms are built on lies, who do little more than read speeches written by others, and who, once in office, raise taxes, contribute to moral decay, and prove themselves incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities they were entrusted with.

Many argue that there is little difference between candidates from the two major parties. However, consider the consequences of the current president's tenure. Under his administration, inflation skyrocketed to near-historic levels, depleting your finances every time you make a purchase. Nearly every aspect of life has seen rising costs, while value and quality have sharply declined over the past four years. He has consistently supported and empowered individuals whose actions threaten to undermine the moral foundation of this country. The list of disasters he has caused and exacerbated—both domestically and internationally—is too extensive to list here. However, one thing can be said: The only silver lining is that his time in office is soon coming to an end.

California is a beautiful state, a veritable paradise, but much of it is being ruined by misguided leadership. Fires rage out of control, causing astronomical damage. The apocalyptic images of terrifying destruction continue to plague people as the infernos burn. The authorities, from the ambitious governor on down, have been shown to be completely inept in managing the state, contributing to the very catastrophe people have been warning about for years.

Due to their laws and agendas, the main reservoir was emptied, the fire department was more focused on diversifying its firefighting force than improving it, the fire hydrants didn't work, and there simply wasn't enough water, all due to misguided environmental practices. When the Los Angeles mayor heard about a devastating fire starting, she quickly flew to Africa, only to return in a panic, revealing her incompetence.

When we witness the results of errant leadership, we are reminded of what happens when people fail to use the common sense Hashem has granted them. If we are yirei Hashem, we must learn from what we see around us and strive to improve ourselves. When we see the destruction caused by evil, irresponsible actions, we should learn from those experiences and quickly mend our ways.

We should turn to the pesukim and see how our avos conducted themselves and how Hashem directed them. When we daven, we should do so with more kavonah, taking time to say each word properly and think about what we are saying.

When reciting Krias Shema twice daily, slowly and carefully, we say the words, "Vechorah af Hashem bochem v'otzar es hashomayim velo yihyeh motor," meaning that if you conduct yourselves improperly, Hashem will shut the heavens and there will be no rain.

To understand the significance of this, we need only look at the multi-million-dollar mansions that were quickly reduced to ashes. People who thought they were invincible, whose castles could withstand anything, learned a very quick lesson about the vulnerability of man.

Despite their wealth and status, they were reminded that material possessions, no matter how opulent or carefully protected, can be destroyed in an instant by forces beyond their control. The experience highlights the precariousness of even the most extravagant empires, showing the fragility of security and the limits of wealth in the face of Hakadosh Boruch Hu's power. It also serves as a reminder that true stability and safety cannot be bought. They must be earned.

We are a people set apart, called to embody purpose and conviction. We were created to stand for something greater, with values that run deep and are held with unwavering sincerity. We, as a people, are not meant to be corrupt or immoral, nor are we to worship wealth or those who possess it. Our calling is not merely to speak of our values, but to live by them, every day, in every way. We are to uphold them with integrity and to respect only those who do the same.

In this week's parsha, we are introduced to Moshe Rabbeinu. After a blissful childhood in the royal palace, upon his first exit from Paroh's compound, he witnessed the suffering of his enslaved brethren. He also came upon two evil individuals and reprimanded one for slapping the other. For this act, he was forced to flee to Midyon. Speaking of "come-downs," he went from a pampered life to working with sheep as a lowly shepherd in the blink of an eye. But as with everything else in life, this shift was arranged by Hakadosh Boruch Hu, who had far greater plans for Moshe Rabbeinu.

One day, as he was leading the sheep to pasture on Har Choreiv, he noticed a burning bush. As the fire raged, he observed that the bush's branches were not being consumed.

Moshe approached the bush to investigate this strange phenomenon. He thought that perhaps something supernatural was happening and that there might be a lesson in this occurrence for him. He sensed a hidden sanctity in the blaze.

Hashem called out to him from the bush and told him that he was standing on holy ground. Hashem then instructed him to return to Mitzrayim and lead His people to freedom in the Promised Land.

Hashem chose Moshe as the leader of the Jewish people because, instead of ignoring the burning bush, he approached it and recognized holiness. Though he was in a desert, his life was centered around kedusha, and wherever he went, he searched for kedusha.

When Moshe saw a fire burning without being fueled as a natural fire would be, he stopped. Perhaps he had stumbled upon the kedusha he had been seeking. In the darkness of a strange land, amidst the emptiness of a desert, he found it.

This moment identified Moshe as the one who could lead the children of Avrohom, Yitzchok, and Yaakov from the depths of Mitzrayim. As we exist in golus, the ability to distinguish fact from fiction, and holy from vile, is paramount. Striving for a life of kedusha and constantly seeking kedusha by examining and learning from our daily encounters is what keeps us on the path from golus to geulah.

Throughout our history, our leaders have been able to perceive holiness where others saw emptiness. They saw holy sparks where others saw darkness, and they found glory in a lowly bush with no chance for growth.

In golus, there are times when people want to give up. They see danger, they see destruction, they feel social hatred and cultural depravity on all sides, and they think it's over. They see people who have erred and veered from the holy path, and they give up on them. They think that nothing good will ever come from them. They are burnt out. Yet, the good and the great see sparks of holiness waiting to be ignited.

Each week, as the melava malka candles flicker, we gaze at them and reflect on the sublime joy of Shabbos, wondering how we'll face another week—six more days of zei'as apecha—until we can experience Shabbos again.

The transition from Shabbos to Motzoei Shabbos mirrors what the Bnei Yisroel faced as they left Eretz Yisroel and moved to Mitzrayim to escape hunger. They left behind light and holiness and descended into darkness and defilement.

We partake of melava malka to ease that transition. We sing “Al tira avdi Yaakov.” We say, “Do not fear. You are equipped with the strength and ability to rise above it all and remain true to yourselves, to each other, and to the Torah if you remain loyal to the teachings and lessons transmitted from one generation to the next from avdi Yaakov.”

“Hakol kol Yaakov.” With the calm voice of Yaakov, with the restrained middos of Yaakov, with the temimus of Yaakov, and with the dedication to Torah that Yaakov personified, we can overcome.

We can bring salvation to those who suffer. We can push back against those who torment us. We can overcome the challenges that threaten us. We can support those who are struggling and return those who have fallen away.

We press on, always growing, moving upward, and reaching new heights every day. Each day represents an opportunity to improve in Torah, kedusha, emunah, and bitachon. We observe the world around us and learn lessons from watching others falter.

We witness natural occurrences and pause to ponder, think, and grow from what we have seen.

Where others see darkness, we see the boundless potential for light to emerge. Where others are lost in loneliness, we recognize the profound opportunity to extend friendship, connection, and community. Where others witness destruction and fires consuming all in their path, we see fertile ground for renewal—an opportunity to rebuild, re-grow, and cultivate something even more beautiful and lasting than before.

We do not shy away from the challenges before us. Instead, we embrace them, knowing that within every hardship lies the seed of transformation. In every shadow, we discern the dawn of hope, and in every setback, we sense the chance to rise higher until we merit the coming of Moshiach speedily in our day.