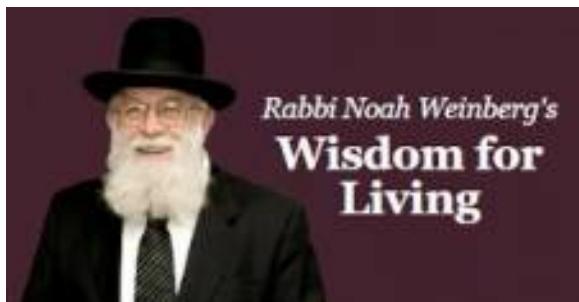


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## The Last Plague

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.

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.

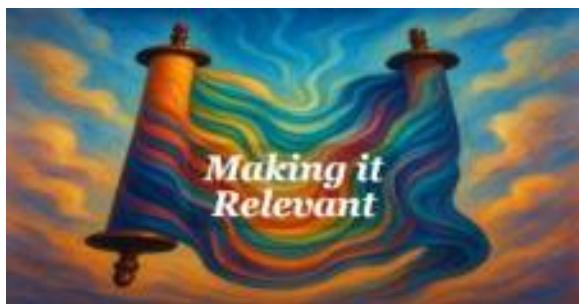
At Sinai the Jewish people were united. "*Vayichan sham Yisrael neged hahar* – And Israel encamped there, opposite the mountain" (*Shemos* 19:2). The word "*vayichan* – encamped" is written in the singular; the nation became *ke'ish echad belev echad*, like one man with one purpose. When that happens,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



## Dimensions of Darkness

Just as every structure has its foundation, beliefs support and spiritually anchor our lives. Beliefs help us interpret everyday reality and make sense of the world. Our belief systems help us clarify what's right, wrong, true, or false. Beliefs influence our standards of behavior and define who we are. What can happen if one's belief system suddenly collapses? People can be figuratively plunged into a mental state of darkness and despair.

The Torah describes an intense darkness that engulfed Egypt. "A man did not see his fellow, nor did anyone get up from his place for three days." *Rashi* comments that "there was a darkness of gloom when no man saw another during those three days, and there was, moreover, another period of three days of darkness twice as thick as this, when no man rose from his place."

The plagues were the manifestation of God's Presence and might. The pagan Egyptians were catapulted into an existential crisis. Everything in which they believed collapsed before them. Frozen in place, as if imprisoned by an inescapable gloom, the darkness of despondency became palpable.

## The Other Darkness

The experience of clinical depression can feel as if one is subsumed—plagued—by hopelessness and social isolation. The psychological anguish of depression places one in a type of solitary and "soulitary" confinement. Whereas physical darkness is outside us, depression comes from within. Depressed individuals don't want to get out of bed because they feel hopeless. There's no reason to rise. This loss of hope can prevent people from trying to improve their reality. They can become mentally and physically catatonic.

Regarding the plague of darkness, the Torah states that "no one could raise himself up." Many of us have experienced low points. The darkness of mental

suffering is a comprehensive affliction of both body and soul. The *Chiddushei Harim* states that "there is no greater darkness than one in which 'a man did not see his fellow,' in which a person becomes oblivious to the needs of others." When that happens, a person becomes stymied in their personal development as well.

What can we take away from darkness? Acknowledging another's struggle may help decrease it. It sends a message that "you matter." Asking someone if he or she is OK, and expressing concern, signals that somebody cares.

If you are suffering, let someone you trust know. Verbalizing your inner burden can help alleviate it, at least to some degree. Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi stated that "one small light can push away a whole lot of darkness."

We are so busy living our lives that it's easy not to notice when someone else is in a low place. Be a light for someone else—whether it's a child, or anyone experiencing confusion, pain, or loss. Lighting another's candle doesn't diminish your flame.

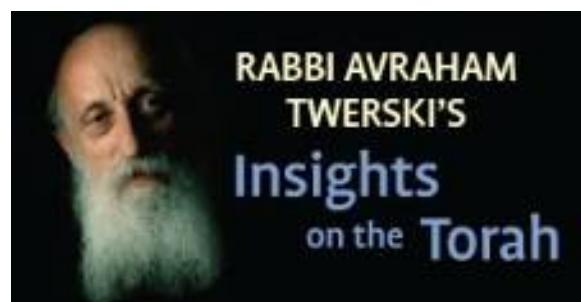
The perpetual light and wisdom of our Torah can illuminate the soul and mind. They can penetrate the darkness, but only if we perceive it. Each of us can be a lamplighter. Ignite your inner light from the everlasting flame of the Torah. Then, light someone else's.

## Making It Relevant

We all experience times of darkness. Strive to *grow* through them, not merely *go* through them.

Try to be more mindful of the ongoing struggles of those around you.

Find a trusted confidante with whom to share your thoughts and inner feelings.



## Visualizing the Exodus Experience

And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, "It is because of this that God acted on my behalf when I left Egypt." (13:8)

The Haggadah says that the mitzvah of narrating the story of the Exodus is on the night of the fifteenth day of Nissan, when the matzah and *maror* (bitter herbs) are before our eyes on the Seder table. This is derived from the above verse. The phrase, "It is because of this" indicates that one is referring to some object, i.e., the matzah and *maror*.

The Alter (Elder) of Kelm says that the patriarchs had an intellectual knowledge of God, which was sufficient for them. However, for the average person, an intellectual knowledge is inadequate to bind him to the will of God. Our conviction of the reality of something we see with our own eyes is greater than something whose reality is known to us only because we can reason its existence. God, therefore, showed the Israelites the awesome miracles of the Exodus, to impress upon them a firm conviction of His sovereignty over the world.

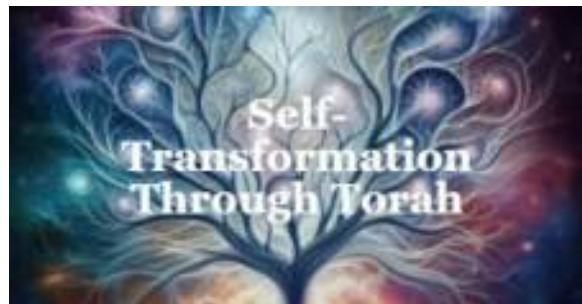
As the generations became more distant from the Exodus, the sense impression of the miracles faded, and we are now left with only an intellectual knowledge of the Exodus. To reinforce our conviction of the events of the Exodus, we use tangible objects, such as matzah and *maror*, to stimulate a sense impression.

Rabbi Shlomo Wolbe, says that we must use the powers of our imagination to strengthen our convictions. The Torah says, "Beware for yourself, lest you forget the things that your eyes have beheld and lest you remove them from your heart all the days of your life... the day that you stood before God at Horeb... You stood at the foot of the mountain, and the mountain was burning with fire up to the heart of heaven... God spoke to you from the midst of the fire." (Deuteronomy 4:9-12). This was said to the people who personally witnessed the revelation at Sinai, but it applies to us as well. With our imagination we must see ourselves as our ancestors were at Sinai, seeing the mountain aflame, hearing the thunder, witnessing the lightning and hearing the sound of the shofar.

The Haggadah says that in every generation, a person is obligated to see himself as though he was

personally delivered from Egypt. We must visualize in our minds the plagues inflicted upon Pharaoh, the scene of three million people leaving Egypt and the dividing of the Reed Sea.

The accoutrements of the Seder are indeed helpful, but we should use the powers of our imagination to experience the Exodus.



## What is the First Mitzvah in the Torah?

In this week's Torah portion, as the final plagues bring Egypt to its knees and the laws of Passover make their debut, a profound moment unfolds - the giving of the very first mitzvah to the Jewish people.

Think about it - if you were crafting the perfect first commandment for a newly freed nation, what would you choose? Perhaps "Love your fellow as yourself" - the foundation of human relationships? Maybe Shabbat - the weekly reminder of God's creation? Or possibly the study of Torah itself - the blueprint for Jewish life?

With such monumental options available, the actual first mitzvah might surprise you. It wasn't about prayer, morality, or even belief in God. Instead, it was... Rosh Chodesh - the sanctification of the new moon.<sup>1</sup>

Anticlimactic? It gets even more intriguing. Rashi, the foremost Torah commentator, makes a striking observation on the very first verse of the Torah. He explains that the Torah, as the guidebook for the Jewish people, could have legitimately begun with the command of Rosh Chodesh instead of the story of creation. This seemingly technical mitzvah wasn't just chosen as our first command - it was actually considered worthy of being the Torah's opening statement!

What elevated this mitzvah to such prominence, not just as our first command, but as a contender for the Torah's very first verse? And why does God choose

to give it now, right as the Jewish people are about to go free from Egypt? The answers reveal nothing less than the blueprint for Jewish identity and destiny.

## Oppressed Slaves to Divine Partners

The Talmud<sup>2</sup> reveals something remarkable about this mitzvah. The words "This month **shall be unto you**" teach us that the Jewish court has the power to determine when each month begins, even if their declaration doesn't perfectly align with the moon's appearance. Consider the magnitude of this moment: For 210 years, every minute of Jewish life had been dictated by Egyptian taskmasters. Sunrise meant trudging to the brick pits, sunset meant collapsing in exhaustion, and every hour between belonged to Pharaoh. Now, in His first command to the newly emerging nation, God didn't impose more rules - He granted power over time itself. We would determine the months, establish the holidays, and shape the spiritual energy of the year. This wasn't just freedom from bondage; it was elevation to partners in Creation.

## People of the Moon

God mirrored this profound new relationship in the very symbol He chose for the mitzvah - the moon. According to the Zohar, the moon represents the Jewish people. Accordingly, we can derive three profound truths about our destiny from its cycle:

First, just as the moon waxes and wanes, our nation will experience near constant fluctuation between periods of darkness and light. Yet, like the moon, we always have the potential to recreate ourselves. In fact, many people use Rosh Chodesh as a time to take a personal accounting and make the necessary changes to align their lives with their goals and higher vision of themselves. Furthermore, just as the moon's essence remains constant behind its changing appearance, the Jewish people endure through every trial. After each destruction, we return, as brilliant as ever - *Am Yisrael Chai!* The Jewish People live!

Second, just as the moon reflects the sun's light rather than generating its own, our strength comes from our connection to God.<sup>3</sup> Even King David, our mightiest leader, attributed all his achievements to the Divine. It should come as no surprise that we proclaim "*Dovid Melech Yisrael, Chai V'Kayam!*" -- David, King of Israel, lives forever -- during the blessing of the new month!

Third, when the moon appears darkest to us, it's actually closest to the sun - positioned directly

between Earth and its source of light.<sup>4</sup> What a powerful message: in our times of greatest darkness, when God seems most distant, He may be closest of all.

## Celebrating Potential

But perhaps the deepest wisdom of Rosh Chodesh lies in its timing. Why celebrate the moon's rebirth at the beginning of the month instead of its fullness in the middle? For the same reason we celebrate a Bar Mitzvah - not for the awkward Torah reading and canned sermon of a nervous teenager, but for his magnificent potential. We Jews always celebrate beginnings - bris, bar mitzvah, and wedding - because we understand that the journey toward greatness is as sacred as the achievement itself. On Rosh Chodesh, the beginning of the moon's cycle towards fullness, we look forward to the month ahead and arouse in ourselves the desire to achieve our utmost potential. This quest for self-actualization is the entire purpose of God's Torah, making it the perfect choice for our first mitzvah.

The next time Rosh Chodesh comes around, take a moment to ponder these lessons. Remember that each month brings a fresh opportunity to partner with God in creation, to find light in darkness, and to begin again. Like the moon, we can always renew ourselves, drawing strength from our Source and reflecting divine light into the world.

Shabbat Shalom! Avraham

1. Exodus 12:2

2. Tractate Rosh Hashana 22A

3. The Sforno points out that the pasuk in parshas Pinchas (Bamidbar 28:11) refers to Rosh Chodesh as "Roshei Chadsheichem" - YOUR Rosh Chodeshes. Why Your? It doesn't say Your Sukkoses or Your Day of Bikkurim (Shavuos)! Answer: Rosh Chodesh is ours because we as Klal Yisrael are metaphorically represented by the moon, in that we draw our light only from Hashem.

4. During the new moon (when we celebrate Rosh Chodesh), the moon is positioned between Earth and the sun. From our perspective on Earth, the moon appears dark because its illuminated side faces away from us. As the moon continues its orbit, we see more and more of its sunlit surface (waxing) until it reaches full moon, when Earth is between the moon and sun. Then the visible sunlit portion decreases (waning) until the moon returns to its position between Earth and sun, beginning the cycle anew.