

the *chacham*, wise son, is cited in *Sefer Devarim* 6:20, “If your child asks you tomorrow, saying, “What are the testimonies and decrees and the ordinances that Hashem, our G-d, commanded you?” There is a glaring distinction between the questions presented by the wise son and his simple “brother” and that of the wicked son. The word “tomorrow” is included in the text of the question of the wise and simple brothers, while such reference to the future is omitted from the wicked son’s question.

In his *Shemen HaTov*, **Horav Zev Weinberger, Shlita**, explains that the concept of *machar*, “tomorrow,” contrasts the difference in approach to *mitzvos* manifest by the *rasha* and the *chacham* and *tam*. The wise son and, likewise, the simple son have questions which bother them. They have issues concerning the *mitzvos* which they would like to have reconciled. *Sforno* delves into some of the *halachic* issues presented by the *Korban Pesach* which need explaining. These questions, however, do not in any way inhibit their observance. Their performance of the *mitzvos* is not suppressed by the questions. They go forward and act. “Tomorrow,” after they have affirmed their commitment to the *mitzvah*, they will present their questions.

The *rasha* is not so “hasty” in his commitment. He acts only when he fully understands the *mitzvah* and everything related to it. He really does not want to observe; he is always seeking some rationale to excuse himself. **Horav Chaim Soloveitchik, zl**, once traveled to a town in which one of his ex-students lived. I say “ex,” because he was a bright, young aspiring scholar who could, and should have, achieved greatness. Something went wrong along the way, and he went off the *derech*, left the fold. While the young man had rejected religious observance, he still missed his revered *rebbe*, and, therefore, asked for an appointment to visit with him. The appointment was granted.

“*Rebbe*, I have many questions to ask concerning Judaism, the Torah and *halachah*,” the young man began. *Rav* Chaim interjected, “I am prepared to spend all day and all night in discussion with you, responding to your questions. There is, however, one condition – answer one question for me: Tell me the truth concerning these ‘questions’ that you have: Did they trouble you before you desecrated *Shabbos* or afterwards?”

“To tell the truth, it was after I became a *mechallel Shabbos*, desecrated *Shabbos*, that these questions began to disturb me,” the young man replied.

“If that is the case,” countered *Rav* Chaim, “these are not questions. They are answers to justify your rejection of *Yiddishkeit*. You are seeking to validate your apostasy. I want no part of that.”

Rav Weinberger notes another discrepancy between the wicked son and his two brothers. Concerning the wicked son, the text of his question is written in the plural, whereas, regarding the *chacham* and the *tam*, the question is presented in the singular. He suggests that this alludes to the pernicious character of the *ben rasha*, wicked son. He is not satisfied merely to reject the religion of his parents by himself. He attempts to sway others and pull them into his maelstrom of iniquity. I think the reason is simple: the wicked are insecure. They know that they are wrong. They know that they

cannot support this approach. Thus, they must pursue others. Falsehood cannot stand alone. Truth needs no support.

Va’ani Tefillah

אש וברד שלג וקיטור רוח סערה עושה וברו – **Eish u’barad, sheleg v’kitor, ruach se’arah osah devaro. Fire and hail, snow and smoke; stormy winds fulfilling His word.**

All of Hashem’s creations do exactly as He wills them to do. The **Chafetz Chaim, zl**, comments that we do not take this idea seriously. During a year in which rain is lacking, when the soil is parched and crops die, we attribute it to the climate. When it does not stop raining, the fields are flooded and the crops rot, we blame the climate. An early frost with snow blanketing the crown, killing young seedlings, signals the beginning of an early winter. Indian summers, cold winters, droughts, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, global warming, all of these are terms which we hear from the weatherman or the politician. Do we ever think about Source of these winds, the One behind the climate changes, the global warming? All of these phenomena are *oseh devaro*, carrying out His Will. They do not act alone or independently. They are agents of the Almighty, conveying His message. Thus, every phenomenon, every change in the status quo, is a reminder for us to introspect and ask ourselves: What is Hashem asking of me? What is Hashem telling me? Certainly, we should not ignore these messages.

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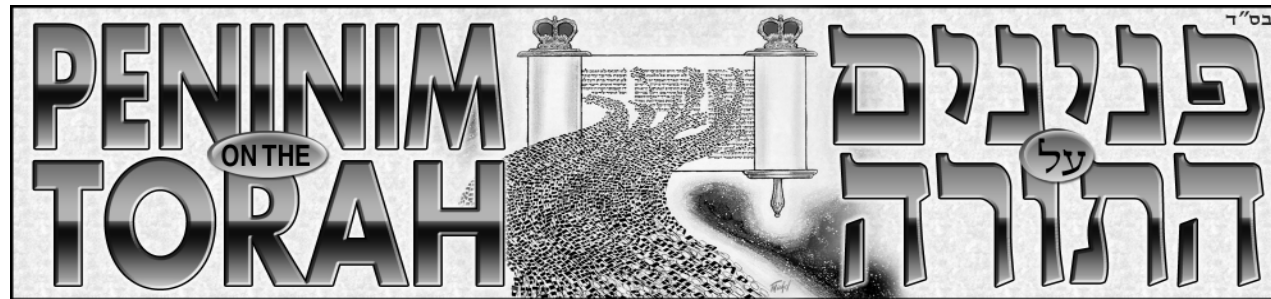
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Parashas Bo

תש"ע

פרשת בא

TORAH THOUGHTS ON THE PARSHA

מי ומי ההלכים. יאמר משה בעריו ובוקינו נלך בבנינו ובבנותנו... כי חג' לנו
Pharaoh demanded, “Which ones are going?” Moshe said, “With our youngsters and with our elders shall we go; with our sons and with our daughters... because it is a festival of Hashem for us.” (10:8,9)

Pharaoh demanded that only a designated group of Jews leave Egypt to celebrate and bring offerings to G-d. Moshe *Rabbeinu* responded that everyone must be permitted to leave. It was a festival to Hashem and, as such, the entire nation was required to attend. A Jewish festival is for all Jews – men and women – when they become of age. This is the simple explanation. I would like to take an innovative – perhaps bold – approach to Moshe’s dialogue with Pharaoh.

Pharaoh told Moshe to take *yechidim*, individuals, the elite, those who understood the meaning of offering sacrifices in the wilderness to G-d. The *hamon am*, average Jew, had no reason to go. Moshe replied that, *chag Hashem lanu*, it is “a festival of Hashem for us,” and Hashem wants His entire nation to share in His festival. Judaism is neither only for the elite, nor is it the sole possession of a few select communities. It is for everyone; everywhere.

B'neareinuu u'b'zekeineinu neilach, b'vanein u'bivnoseinu, “with our youngsters and with our elders shall we go; with our sons and with our daughters.” *Klal Yisrael* is comprised of many factions, of individuals of all stripes, personalities and backgrounds. They hail from all parts of the country and all corners of the globe. Some have always been observant, descendants of illustrious lineages, while others have only recently entered the fold of observance. Yes, some are “elders” in *Yiddishkeit* and others are “youngsters.” Some are comfortable in their religious status-quo, while others are struggling to survive spiritually. Some present themselves with no care in the world, while others walk around as if they are carrying all the world’s problems on their shoulders. In a large community, the “young” at risk – or “young” at heart – tend to get lost in the shuffle. The “old,” with the various issues characterizing their past and future, seem to take a back door to the challenges of the present. Each “son” and “daughter,” an individual in his or her own right, is at risk for being swallowed up among the massive numbers, but every one of them is an individual who has his or her own story. Every soul has his or her unique issues, which must be addressed sensitively on a case by case basis. They are all a part of the collective *Klal Yisrael* and, thus, each is an essential component of every religious experience. They, too, must be

permitted to leave Egypt, because, without them, the experience would be incomplete. Moshe told Pharaoh that *Klal Yisrael* is not comprised only of the “few and the proud.” We are all proud to be a part of the glorious Jewish people.

We must remember that some people need more attention. Two stories occurred during a class of a popular rabbi. The topic was unconditional love, caring for someone in a manner that is unwavering and not determined by tangential factors. No motives – no factors – no benefits: simply, love and caring. As the lecturer was speaking, a gentleman to the right of the lectern muttered, “Absolutely right. The only unconditional love is the love you get from your pet dog.” The man repeated himself; this time, his voice was slightly elevated. He continued, louder and more aggressively, “Human love can never be trusted. People will disappoint you, but your dog will always love you, unconditionally. When you come home after a hard day, your dog will greet you at the door, lick you and accept you. Human love is unpredictable, always changing, always has strings attached.”

It was clear that this man had some serious issues. The next time he began to rave about humans being unreliable and dogs being man’s best and most dependable friend, a woman screamed out dismissively, “We did not come here to listen to you talk about your dog. Stop raving like a lunatic, so that we can listen to the rabbi.”

The man glared back at her as he hissed, “You are so shallow.” It was now up to the rabbi to respond to the scenario. He said, “Listen, this week we are addressing human love. Next time, I will allow for a seminar on canine love.” The man surprisingly acquiesced to the rabbi and even said, “Thank you, I understand.”

After the class, the rabbi received a note from another one of the lecture’s attendees. The note read, “I have been attending your class for upward of two years. During the course of the classes, I have learned many important lessons. Tonight, however, I learned the most important lesson of all: the respect one must show to people, regardless of how strangely they might behave. You have healed me tonight from my greatest failing: my lack of trust in human dignity.”

A number of months later, the man who had an obsession for his dog also wrote a thank-you note: “Your validation of me has given me the strength to deal with some of the very difficult challenges that I am confronting. Over the years, people have considered me weird because of the bizarre way in which I react to issues concerning love. That night, something changed. For once someone did not view me as a reject, an odd bird with issues. The

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fact that you actually allowed me to continue along with my eccentricity opened some significant doors for me. I now believe in new possibilities.”

The next anecdote tells a story that many of us in public life have experienced at one time or another. This time it took place at a weekend retreat in the Catskills. As always, it occurred at a public gathering and one stereotypical woman could just not stop complaining. This woman did not like the room, the food, the stereotypical program, the waiters, the air conditioning; the list went on. She was inconsolable – finding fault in everything and everybody. The rabbi made a feeble attempt at speaking to her, but noted that something else was disturbing her. It was not the aesthetics. She needed space to think and reconcile herself with the demons in her mind.

The next morning, the rabbi’s lecture focused on people helping people, human beings being imbued with the power to console one another. Hashem transfers some of His power to heal to his “agents” in this world. After the rabbi’s short talk, the woman who was obsessed with negativity came over and apologized for her obnoxious behavior. It was the first *yahrzeit* of her son whose *bar-mitzvah* had taken place on that *Shabbos*. She had gone away for the weekend to try to get away from the pain that had been gnawing at her. Her emotional distress had catalyzed her intemperate complaining. After hearing the rabbi’s lecture, she felt somewhat consoled. She believed that people had the power to comfort one another.

A great *gadol* once commented, “Just as we find it necessary to *farefser* – to answer/give meaning to – a *shverer Rambam*, a difficult decision of the *Rambam*, we are likewise obliged to understand a *shverer Yid*. Every Jew has a place of honor in Hashem’s scheme of the world. We must similarly find place in our hearts to reach out to all Jews. This is what Moshe intimated to Pharaoh. Everybody must leave because everybody is an integral part of *Klal Yisrael*.

יום משה את ידו על השמים ויהי חשך ואפלה בכל ארץ מצרים... לא ראו את אחיו ולא קמו איש מתחתיו

Moshe stretched forth his hand towards the Heavens, and there was a thick darkness throughout the land of Egypt... no man could see his brother, nor could anyone rise from his place. (10:22,23)

The ninth plague, *choshech*, darkness, had a devastating effect on the Egyptian people. While one might question why darkness is considered so traumatic, let us attempt to better understand the progression of this plague. During the first three days of darkness, the Egyptians were unable to see one another, but they could move around, albeit slowly and with great caution. The next three days were quite different. The Egyptians could not move around. The darkness was thick, weighing them down. They were frozen in suspended animation. Those who were standing when the darkness struck remained that way, as they were no longer able to sit down. Conversely, those who were sitting when it became “darker” could not arise from their seats. Every empty space in Egypt was filled with thick darkness. While there is no question that this was a horrifying, enervating experience, it still seems far-fetched to suggest that the plague of darkness was more traumatic than the previous eight plagues had been.

Horav Shabsi Yudelewitz, zl, the venerable *Maggid* of Yerushalayim, answers this question pragmatically with a story. In the “old days,” *maggidim*, scholars, who were powerful speakers, would travel from town to town and earn their livelihood by lecturing to the community about ethics, Torah and *yiraas Shomayim*, fear of

G-d. Some of these *maggidim* were quite famous, as a result of their ability to captivate their audience with their spellbinding oratory. One such *maggid* arrived in a small village, far off the beaten path. Its inhabitants were simple Jews, who had not been accorded a Jewish education. Whatever they knew about their religion was transmitted to them by their parents, who themselves had not been proficient in their knowledge of Torah. It is difficult to be an accomplished, observant Jew if one lacks basic knowledge of Torah and the Codes. Additionally, if one does not know what he is missing, it becomes increasingly difficult to motivate him towards observance. Thus, the *maggid* had a tall order to inspire the community to achieve a higher level of observance.

Instilling awe of G-d, the fear of retribution, into a person always seems to “inspire” people. That is exactly what the *maggid* did: He spoke about the contrast between *Gan Eden*, Paradise, and *Gehinom*, Purgatory. With vivid portrayal, he was able to illustrate to the people the reward in store for those who adhere to Hashem’s Torah and the punishment for those who repudiate Hashem’s *mitzvos*. He was a passionate speaker who imbued his audience with a sense of yearning to live like a Jew is supposed to live.

The audience seemed inspired and moved by his words. Suddenly, one gentleman arose and declared loudly, “*Rebbe*, I want to go to *Gehinom*! Yes, that is exactly what I said. In fact, I will repeat it. I want to go to *Gehinom*!”

The *maggid* looked at the speaker incredulously. “Why would you want to do that?” the *maggid* asked.

“Let me explain my predicament,” the man began. “If I live the rest of my life as an observant Jew, meticulously observing Hashem’s Torah and carrying out His *mitzvos*, after 120 years, I will be called to my rightful place in *Gan Eden* to enjoy the tremendous spiritual pleasure in store for those who obey Hashem. One problem which seems to gnaw at me is: with whom will I associate? The rabbis, scholars and righteous individuals are, with all due respect, not my speed. Never in my life did I have any relationship with such pious people. What will we talk about? Now, my friends are the simple Jews who have led lives totally distant from religion. They will all be in *Gehinom*. Therefore, I want to go to *Gehinom*, so that I will have someone to talk with. Otherwise, I will be very bored.”

“You are utterly mistaken,” the *maggid* countered. Do you think for one minute that in the *Olam HaEmes*, World of Truth, you will meet up with your friends? No. You are wrong. *Gan Eden* is a place filled with incredible light. It is a place of overwhelming joy and happiness. The righteous all sit together, sharing in the pleasure derived from the shine of the *Shechinah*. The *tzaddikim* have the opportunity to meet once again and renew old acquaintances with the other righteous who lived in their generation.

“This is quite unlike the morbid, dreary scenario in *Gehinom*. There, darkness reigns. One neither sees another soul, nor hears a sound. He cannot raise his hand or lift his leg. *Gehinom* is a lonely, dreary place. The individual sits alone amid darkness, surrounded by his sins. There is nothing there – but him.”

This is what occurred in Egypt during *makkas choshech*. The Egyptians were engulfed in thick darkness, but the loneliness made it worse. The Egyptians could not share their feelings of fear, anger, grief and frustration with anyone else. This is why *choshech* was so devastating. True, the earlier plagues had caused great destruction, almost ruining the entire country, but each Egyptian had not suffered alone. They all suffered collectively. This gave them a measure of comfort. It eased their pain. One can accede to the most ruinous plague as long as he is not alone, as long as he can share his travail with his fellowman. In *makkas choshech*, “no man could see his brother.” This added “feature” rendered the plague unbearable.

החדש הזה לכם ראש חדשים

This month shall be for you the beginning of the months. (12:2)

The following *d’var Torah* may not necessarily be *parsha* appropriate, but I just could not pass up the story and its powerful lesson. Many women observe the custom of refraining from certain chores on *Rosh Chodesh*. Years ago, washing machines were an appliance that was found in the homes of the most wealthy – certainly not in the impoverished neighborhood of the Old City in Yerushalayim. Usually a laundress was hired. This woman, who was herself from a very poor family, would slave over the washing board, washing each article of clothing individually. It was difficult labor, which often lasted from early in the morning until late at night, but it was her means of earning a livelihood.

One *Rosh Chodesh* morning, **Horav Yosef Chaim Sonnenfeld, zl**, was on his way to *Shacharis*, morning services, when he heard a loud commotion down the block. Curious if he could help someone in need, he asked his daughter-in-law, who lived with him after the passing of his *rebbeitzin*, to inquire as to the nature of the disturbance.

She returned with the following tale of woe. Apparently, one of the women had a routine for her laundress, who would come on schedule once every week. The laundress arrived in the pre-dawn darkness to begin her day’s labor, only to discover that her employer had forgotten that it was *Rosh Chodesh*. Since she was very observant, she refused to permit her to wash the clothes. The custom was not to do laundry on *Rosh Chodesh*, and she refused to deviate from the custom – regardless of the woman’s pleas. The laundress cried that if she did not work, she could not eke out her wretched livelihood, which was especially critical since her husband was incapacitated and could not work. This meant that her children would go hungry. They began to argue gently, until it escalated into a full-scale fight, which woke up the entire neighborhood.

When *Rav* Yosef Chaim heard the story, he immediately asked his daughter-in-law if they had any dirty laundry at home. If so, they would hire the laundress for a few hours, so that the day should not be an entire loss for her. “Quickly, bring the woman to our house for a few hours,” *Rav* Yosef Chaim urged. “To cause such sorrow and pain to a poor Jewish woman is a much greater offense than breaking a religious custom.”

The daughter-in-law ran to call the woman to their home before she had a chance to leave the neighborhood. As she was setting up her washboard, there was a knock at the door. It was the woman who had originally hired the laundress. “If the *Rav* can have his laundry washed on *Rosh Chodesh*, then so can I!” she declared, and she rehired the woman for the remainder of the day.

The point that I would like to accentuate is that *mentchlichkeit*, human decency, should complement *frumkeit*. Without question, we do not ignore a *halachah* in order to conform to decency, but when one can balance the other, why should it not? Some of us think that a *mitzvah* takes precedence over anything another person might be doing. Thus, he can make much noise in his apartment in celebrating a *mitzvah* – even if it is at the expense of his neighbor’s sleep. One feels that his *davening* will be failing if he does not enunciate the words loudly. The fact that this may infringe upon his neighbor’s *kavanah*, concentration, is unimportant. He is performing a *mitzvah*. There are those who introduce new *mitzvos* – such as feeling the urge to “text” during *davening* or letting their phone ring during *davening* – despite the fact that it disturbs everybody in *shul*. After all, he is waiting for an important phone call – which concerns a *mitzvah*.

Much of this is related to one’s self-perception or, rather,

his self-absorption. We are often so obsessed with ourselves that we do not notice that anyone else exists. This is especially true in the performance of a *mitzvah*. My *mitzvah* takes precedence over everything and everybody. *Mentchlichkeit* is dismissed. Our own self-righteous attitude supersedes all else. I find this especially true when it concerns our children, who are extensions of ourselves. It happens more often than I care to elaborate. A child comes home with a complaint about his *rebbe*. Heaven forbid that a parent gives the *rebbe* the benefit of the doubt, or even goes to the trouble of making a phone call to discuss his “*tzaddik’s*” behavior and what might have provoked the *rebbe’s* alleged reaction. Immediately, the *rebbe* is deemed, at best, incompetent, and, at worst, a danger to society. The next step is speaking to the principal, who has the good sense to act diplomatically, which means agreeing to “look into the matter,” while simultaneously supporting the *rebbe*.

The parents are not placated. After all, we are dealing with the future *gadol ha’dor*, leader of the generation. If the *rebbe* is not removed, it might prove harmful to other students. Mind you, nothing negative has been confirmed concerning the *rebbe*. Now, the parents feel it incumbent to start a movement against the *rebbe*. The malignant disease of slander spreads throughout the parent body until the principal is forced to take action. The rest of the story is easy to predict. The *rebbe’s* life is ruined: no job; no future; ultimately, no family, all because of self-righteous parents who were so self-absorbed in their child’s education that they did not allow for rationality and *mentchlichkeit* to prevail.

Let me end with a story that demonstrates how a *mentch* should act. Traditions and customs are extremely important to Jewish life. A *minhag Yisrael*, Jewish custom, has the status of *halachah* in some cases. There are two customs regarding walking one’s child down to the *chuppah*. The prevailing custom in the *chassidic* world is that both fathers walk the *chossan*, while both mothers walk down the *kallah*. In the Lithuanian *yeshivah* world, both of the parents walk their children down together. A man once came to **Horav Yaakov Kamenetsky, zl**, who, aside from being a *gadol ba’Torah*, was also the embodiment of *mentchlichkeit* and *yashrus*, decency and integrity, with all human beings. The man was marrying off his son, and the issue regarding walking down to the *chuppah* surfaced. What should they do?

“*Rebbe*,” the father began, “this is our only child. We have waited for years for this auspicious moment, but the *kallah’s* family is *chassidic* and their custom is to have the *chossan* walk down with both fathers. I would like to know: What is the *Rosh Yeshivah’s minhag*, custom, regarding his own children? We will abide by the *Rosh Yeshivah’s* custom.”

“My custom,” replied *Rav* Yaakov, “is to do whatever the other side wants.” And he did. The *Rosh Yeshivah* had six children. Three, he walked down with his *rebbeitzin*, while for the other three, he followed the *minhag* of the other family. He did not get carried away with himself. Neither should we.

היה כי יאמרו אליכם בניכם מה העבדה הזאת לכם

And it shall be when your children say to you, “What is this service to you?” (12:26)

In the *Haggadah*, this question is attributed to the wicked son. Interestingly, of the four sons expounded upon in the *Haggadah*, three of them are in this *parsha*. They are: 1.) The *rasha* (12:26); 2.) the *tam*, simple son, “And it shall be when your son will ask you at some future time, ‘What is this?’” (ibid 13:14); 3.) the *she’eino yodea lishol*, one who does not know how to ask; “And you shall tell your son on that day, saying, ‘“It is because of this that Hashem acted on my behalf when I left Egypt”’ (ibid 13:8);” The fourth son,