

THE GREATEST MIRACLE OF ALL

PARSHAT VA'ERA

19 - 25 Tevet 5785
19 - 25 January 2025

Torah: Exodus 6:2 - 9:35
Haftorah: Ezekiel 28:25 - 29:21

PSALMS DAILY

Psalms for our brethren in the Holy Land

Psalms 117

1. Praise the Lord, all nations, laud Him, all peoples.
2. For His kindness has overwhelmed us, and the truth of the Lord is eternal. Hallelujah!

(Please say Chapter 20 daily)

SEFER HAMITZVOS (SUNDAY)

Negative Commandment #241: Taking Collateral from a Widow

It is forbidden for a creditor to take collateral for a debt from a widow - whether she is wealthy or poor.

Negative Commandment #242: Taking Food Preparation Utensils as Collateral

It is forbidden for a creditor to take food preparation utensils - e.g., grinders, kneading bowls, pots, and knives - as collateral for a debt.

I recently stumbled upon an article titled: "Seven Tips for Fighting Fairly in Marriage."

It opened by saying that "Fighting fairly is one of the most important skills you can learn in order to keep your marriage healthy and strong..."

I hear the logic. If you're going to end up fighting anyways, why not learn to fight fairly?

At the risk of sounding youthful and newly married (which I am), I believe the premise is faulty. Not based on my own limited experience and knowledge of marriage, but based on the very first model of matrimony - between G-d and His people, who have lovingly celebrated together thousands of anniversaries.

The Great Debate

Life can be categorized as one long struggle. The particulars of the battle are unique to each individual, but the concept of fighting is not. The common enemy we share is the "evil inclination." It comes in various colors, shapes, and sizes, but ultimately it wants the same thing from us all. It wants our undivided attention, it wants to employ all our energies in the pursuit of selfish desires.

On the flipside, we each possess a G-dly, or goodly, inclination whose agenda is the exact opposite. It wants to corral all our resources and talents in the interest of developing a relationship with G-d helping our fellows.

At the crux of the struggle, however, is the fight for total control over the reservoir of love we each possess - the human capacity to love unconditionally. The love which in its natural form is directed towards G-d. If there is one thing that generates the life-long tug-of-war we experience, it is the struggle for ownership of that love. Will that love remain directed towards G-d, or will it, G-d forbid, be re-channeled towards oneself and lead to an egocentric and hedonistic lifestyle?

But how is this war best fought? How does one outwit the enemy? How is the side of good to maintain ownership over this fountain of love?

And what of someone who awakens one day to the realization that he's allowed his evil inclination to assume control, and now wishes to reclaim the

love for his G-dly soul? How does one shake off a well-entrenched enemy?

This was the subject of debate between two eighteenth century great Chasidic masters: the founder of Chabad, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi, and his contemporary, Rabbi Aryeh Leib of Shpole (affectionately known as the "Shpoler Zeide").

Defense or Offense?

There are two components to every war: defense and offense. Both are necessary in order to win - but which is more necessary? Where should the emphasis be?

The Zeide insisted that the way to eliminate the voice of evil is by terminating any relationship with it. Only after expelling any and every impious thought, word, and deed, could one devote time and energy to the performance of good.

In sports terms, he advocated a "good D." Only after securing your own goalposts could you think of scoring touchdowns.

He quoted King David: "Turn from evil and [only then] do good."

A simple analogy accompanied his scriptural proof: Does it make sense to bring ornate furniture into a home before cleaning it first? What's the point of beautiful furnishings if they sit in filth?

Rabbi Schneur Zalman disagreed. "One who wrestles with a dirty opponent becomes dirty himself," he taught. (Most political campaign can attest to this.) That's how it is with dirt: it schleps you down with it.

Try terminating a bad thought, and you'll only get more stuck in it. But if you actively exchange the thought for another "track," it will cease to exist. Not because you've won it over, but because you moved on to something better.

The famed Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Kotsk put it this way: "I don't expect my Chassidim not to sin. I expect them not to have time to sin."

Moreover, a person constantly involved with good eventually reaches the point where he ceases to sin not only due to a lack of time, but due to a lack of interest; not just in practice, but in principle.

Our sages put it so eloquently when they said that the way to dispel darkness is by adding light. Night is banished through the process of illumination, not elimination.

Back to sports: Rabbi Schneur Zalman was clearly offensively minded.

A Study in Love

To solidify his case, Rabbi Schneur Zalman looked to the Talmud - through the lens of mystical interpretation.

There he found a Mishnah that demonstrated that his argument with the Zeide was an old one. In this Mishnah the Sages discuss the appropriate song for a wedding celebration:

"How does one dance before the bride? Shammai said: 'The bride as she is.'"

Praise her according to the qualities she possesses, Shammai contended, but not more than that.

Hillel disagreed, regardless of the qualities the bride possesses, we sing: "A beautiful and graceful bride!"

Aside for the literal issue being discussed, the Mishnah is alluding to a deeper question: In the context of the marriage between G-d and His people, how does one endear the bride to her Groom? How does one reveal and properly channel the gift of pure love that G-d gave us, in order to evoke a reciprocal love on His part?

Shammai says: "The bride as she is." Only when she is flawless, can she love and be loved.

Hillel argues: "She is a kind and beautiful bride." She doesn't need to wait until she's perfect to love and be loved. Her beauty can transcend her imperfections, if she takes her love to the next level, by adding in charm and grace.

By adding in the realm of good, the bad matters less, if at all. And when one lives a life consumed with goodness, he eventually ascends to a plane where bad ceases to exist altogether.

But what is the source for Hillel's radical idea?

The Wayward Bride

The Israelites were far from pretty when Moses was sent to redeem them. In fact they were deeply steeped in the ugliness of Egypt. They had fallen so low, say the Kabbalists, that one more moment in that evil environment and they would have been finished forever. The bride was far from ready to join her Beloved beneath the wedding canopy. Her love had been compromised; hijacked by Egyptian forces.

Upon being notified by Moses that G-d, her fiancé, was on His way to redeem and marry her, she desperately needed to shape up in preparation.

Short on time and energy, however, she found herself at a crossroads: To break up with her new love, or to rekindle the sparks of old? To forget or to remember?

Hot and Cold



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An esoteric reading of the plagues brought upon Egypt produces the answer to the Israelites' question. For these were not only ten phases of destruction for Pharaoh and his people; on a deeper level, they represented a ten-step rehabilitation program for the Jews.

Of the ten, we will discuss the first two: Blood and Frogs. Both of them centered on the Nile, a body of water that embodied the root of the Israelites' sacrilegious sentiment. Since little to no rain fell in Egypt, the Nile was the source of nourishment in that region. Thus, instead of turning heavenward for sustenance, in the absence of rain they looked earthward.

The Nile represented the worship of nature, as opposed to the worship of G-d. (Accordingly, Pharaoh's decree to drown Jewish children in the Nile was also his desire to see the Jewish future immersed in Egypt's culture of heresy.)

Back to the first plague:

Water is cold and represents apathy; blood is warm and symbolizes passion. Passion and apathy can be good or bad, depending on where they are directed.

"I am now going to strike the water... and it will turn into blood," said G-d. The cool waters of the Nile would become waves of warm, churning blood.

The first step to recovery, G-d was saying, is to transform indifference, embodied by the Nile, into enthusiasm for all things holy. The first move one must make when held captive by Pharaoh is to create a desire for freedom. Don't worry about your lingering attraction to the pyramids. That's not your first priority. Fire yourself up for the

mountains of Sinai, and the other fires will soon die on their own.

Step two is Frogs.

"The river will swarm with frogs, and when they emerge they will go into your palace and bedroom and on your bed and into your ovens and kneading bowls..."

Once the Jew has decided to leave Egypt it is time for Egypt to leave the Jew.

The time had come to let the cold amphibians loose. Wherever they hopped, a stream of cold droplets packed with sarcasm and cynicism was released—directed at the fires of Egypt.

Wherever passion for Egyptian culture had loitered, "in the palace [materialism], the bedroom [loose morals], in the ovens and in the kneading bowls [cuisine]," coldness now reigned. The fires of Egypt had been put out.

At long last the bride was ready to be swept into the arms of her Beloved. Finally, our ancestors were ready to love and be loved.

What's in It for Me?

If you're bogged down by negativity, surround yourself with goodness and kindness. The first step out, is up.

Do you become Superman when you fly, or do you fly when you become Superman?

The path to G-d is through doing good, not just not-bad. The way to spiritually advance is to redirect your spirit, not kill it. Begin your journey by creating new fires, not destroying old ones.

Back to Fair Fighting

A good marriage doesn't take place in a boxing ring; no matter how fair the fight. Because the glue that holds spouses together isn't the pursuit of focusing

upon and fixing faults (and especially not the other's).

Strengthen the good, and the bad will matter less. Eventually it will pale into oblivion, or you might just be blinded by love.

Same difference.

VA'ERA IN A NUTSHELL

The name of the Parshah, "Va'era," means "and I appeared" and it is found in Exodus 6:3.

G-d reveals Himself to Moses. Employing the "four expressions of redemption," namely *take* out the Children of Israel from Egypt, *deliver* them from their enslavement, *redeem* them, and *acquire* them as His own chosen people at "Mount Sinai"; He will then bring them to the land He promised to the Patriarchs as their eternal heritage.

Moses and Aaron repeatedly come before Pharaoh to demand in the name of G-d, "Let My people go, so that they may serve Me in the wilderness." Pharaoh repeatedly refuses. Aaron's staff turns into a snake and swallows the magic sticks of the Egyptian sorcerers. G-d then sends a series of plagues upon the Egyptians.

The waters of the Nile turn to blood; swarms of frogs overrun the land; lice infest all men and beasts. Hordes of wild animals invade the cities; a pestilence kills the domestic animals; painful boils afflict the Egyptians. For the seventh plague, fire and ice combine to descend from the skies as a devastating hail. Still, "the heart of Pharaoh was hardened, and he would not let the children of Israel go, as G-d had said to Moses."

IN JEWISH HISTORY

Sunday, 19 Tevet 5785 - 19 January 2025

Judah Touro (1854)

The 19th of Tevet is the Yahrzeit (anniversary of the passing) of American Jewish philanthropist Judah Touro (5535-5614, or 1775-1854).

Passing of Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller (1812)

Rabbi Aryeh Leib Heller was the rabbi of the city of Stryi, in what is now Western Ukraine. His works - *Ketzot Hachoshen*, *Avnei Milu'im*, and *Shav Shemateta* - are known for their clear, logical analysis of Talmudic texts and ideas, and are staples that are studied in yeshivas throughout the world. He passed away on 19 Tevet 5572, or 1812.

Monday, 20 Tevet 5785 - 20 January 2025

Passing of Maimonides (1204)

Rabbi Moses ben Maimon was a Talmudist, Halachist, physician, philosopher and communal leader, known in the Jewish world by the acronym of his name "RaMBaM" and to the world at large as "Maimonides". He passed away in Egypt on the 20th of Tevet in 4965 (1204).

Printing of Talmud (1483)

The first volume of the Babylonian Talmud, the tractate *Berachot*, was printed in Soncino, Italy, on the 20th of Tevet 5244 (1483).

Tuesday, 21 Tevet 5785 - 21 January 2025

Shimon Born (1567 BCE)

Shimon, the second son of Jacob and Leah and the progenitor of the Jewish tribe of Shimon, was born on 21 Tevet (according to another opinion, on Tevet 28), of the year 2194 (1567 BCE), nine years after Jacob's arrival in Charan.

Purim Ancona (1690)

On 21 Teves 5450 (December 23, 1690), strong earthquakes rattled the city of Ancona, Italy, causing numerous structures to collapse and placing its inhabitants in mortal danger. Miraculously, the Jewish quarter was spared, suffering the collapse of only one house. In commemoration of this event, the local Jewish community established that date as a day of celebration and song, while the previous day - 20 Teves - would be marked yearly by fasting and charity.

Thursday, 23 Tevet 5785 - 23 January 2025

Portuguese Expulsion (1496)

Following the death of King Joao of Portugal in 1494, his son King Manuel I ascended the throne. When his legitimacy as heir to the throne was challenged, Manuel wished to marry Princess Isabel of Spain, daughter of Ferdinand and Isabella, in order to solidify his position. As a precondition to the marriage, the Spanish monarch demanded that Portugal expel its Jews - many of whom were refugees from the 1492 Spanish Expulsion who had found refuge in the neighboring country of Portugal. Manuel agreed, and five days after the marriage agreement was signed, on 23 Tevet 5257 (1496), he issued a decree giving Portugal's Jews eleven months to leave the country.

Appreciating the Jews' economic value, Manuel was unhappy with the potential loss of this economic asset, and devised a way to have the Jews stay in Portugal - but as Christians. Initially, he instructed the Jews to leave from one of three ports, but soon he

restricted them to leaving from Lisbon only. When October of 5757 (1497) arrived, thousands of Jews assembled there and were forcibly baptized. Many Jews stayed and kept their Jewish faith secret; they were called Marranos or Crypto-Jews.

Over the next 350 years, the infamous Inquisition persecuted, tortured and burned at the stake thousands of hidden Jews throughout Spain, Portugal and their colonies for continuing to secretly practice the Jewish faith.

Friday, 24 Tevet 5785 - 24 January 2025

Passing of R. Schneur Zalman of Liadi (1812)

The founder of Chabad Chassidism, Rabbi Schneur Zalman of Liadi (5505-5573, or 1745-1812), passed away on the eve of the 24th of Tevet, 5573, at approximately 10:30 pm, shortly after reciting the Havdalah prayer marking the end of the Shabbat. The Rebbe was in the village of Peyena, fleeing Napoleon's armies, which had swept through the Rebbe's hometown of Liadi three months earlier in their advance towards Moscow. He was in his 68th year at the time of his passing, and was succeeded by his son, Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch.

Safed Earthquake (1837)

A devastating earthquake struck northern Israel, killing four thousand Jews in Safed and between 700 to 1000 Jews in Tiberias. Many of the survivors migrated to Hebron, rejuvenating the developing Chabad community established there 10 years earlier by the second Rebbe of Chabad, Rabbi DovBer of Lubavitch.