



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת חיים

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

פרשת מסעי תשס"ח • Parshas Masei 5768

ANCIENT HANG-UPS

Some historians express high regard for ancient Egyptian civilization. They are considered to be sophisticated for their time, advanced in areas such as agriculture, architecture, education, and even the family structure.

This week's *parshah* gives us a true sense of just how 'civilized' these people really were.

FIRST-BORN AND FALSE GODS

By way of introduction, it is worthwhile to take note of a certain curious association which seems to recur in numerous places.

In the familiar 'Dayeinu' hymn of the Haggadah, we find the following lyrics, which refer to the judgment Hashem meted out to the Egyptian oppressors:

אלו עשה באלוהיהם ולא הרג את בכוריהם דינו.

"If He would have rendered judgment against their false gods, and not have killed their firstborn, that would have been enough for us."

The Haggadah goes on to state how Hashem not only 'took care' of their false gods, but He also killed the firstborn (along with a whole list of wonderful acts of kindness and salvation Hashem performed for our nation).

Apparently, there exists some connection between the 'judgment executed against their deities' (whatever exactly that means; more on that later) and the slaying of the firstborn. These two items seem to be mentioned together quite often, as we find in the Torah itself.

When informing Moshe and Aharon about the upcoming plague, Hashem tells them, "And I will smite every firstborn in the land of *Mitzrayim*..., and I will render judgment against...the false gods of Egypt," (*Shemos 12:12*). This addendum (about punishing the false gods) is not mentioned in

connection with any of the other nine plagues, yet it is consistently tied to the slaying of the firstborn.

The clincher is in this week's *parshah*. When listing the travels of *b'nai Yisrael* from the time of the Exodus, the Torah begins by referring to the initial journey out of Egypt, where the Jews' triumphant departure contrasted sharply with the woes of the preoccupied *Mitzrim*:

וּמִצְרַיִם מְקַבְּרִים אֶת אֲשֶׁר הָקָה ה' בָּהֶם כָּל בְּכוֹר
וּבְאֱלֹהֵיהֶם עָשָׂה ה' שְׁפָטִים:

"The Egyptians were busy burying the casualties of the plague of the firstborn, and Hashem rendered judgment against their deities," (*Bamidbar 33:4*).

At first glance, the simple meaning and flow of this verse is somewhat difficult to grasp. Putting that aside for the moment, we see once again how the punishment of the deities and the firstborn are somehow interconnected, as they are mentioned practically 'in the same breath'. The bottom-line issue at hand seems to be: what's the connection?

PUNISHING THE IDOLS

What exactly is meant by the statement that the false gods were 'punished'?

There are *mefarshim* who explain that the physical idols incurred damage, as their forms broke down. However, this explanation appears difficult for a few reasons. Firstly, it does not seem to account for the uncanny connection mentioned above. What does destroying idols have to do with slaying the firstborn, specifically? Obviously, the idols were never born, let alone born first.

Furthermore, rendering punishment against idols is no simple matter. Obviously, Hashem could do so if He wanted. Yet, it appears from the Mishnah in *Avodah Zarah (4:7)* that Hashem usually chooses to forego this option. The Mishnah relates:

לדין מרן הגה"ר שמואל יעקב בן הרב יצחק מתתיהו זצוק"ל

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MISHNAS
CHAYIM

משנת היום

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שאלו את הזקנים בְּרוֹמִי, אִם אֵין רְצוֹנוֹ בְּעִבּוּדָה זָרָה, לָמָּה אֵינוֹ מְבַטְּלָהּ. אָמְרוּ לָהֶן, אֱלֹהֵי לְדָבָר שְׂאִין צָרְךָ לְעוֹלָם בּוֹ הָיָה עוֹבְדִין, הָיָה מְבַטְּלוֹ. הָרִי הֵן עוֹבְדִין לַחֲמָה וְלִלְבָנָה וְלִכּוֹכְבִים וְלַמַּזְלוֹת. יִאֲבֹד עוֹלָמוֹ מִפְּנֵי הַשּׁוֹטִים.

“The sages of Rome were asked: ‘If Hashem disapproves of idolatry, why doesn’t He just destroy all the idols?’ They replied: ‘If people would worship items that were basically inconsequential, then He would indeed rid the world of them. However, idolaters worship such beneficial objects as the sun, moon, stars, etc. Should Hashem destroy these necessary items on account of some idiots?’”

The Mishnah goes on to explain that destroying just the useless worshipped objects — while retaining the necessary ones — is likewise an undesirable option. The idolaters who worship things like the sun would then erroneously conclude that their deity has real power; the ‘proof’ being, that their god ‘survived’ the destruction which was visited upon the other idols.

In a nutshell, the Mishnah is telling us that Hashem has calculated reasons why — for the most part — He doesn’t wipe out idols. What, then, is the meaning of the ‘punishment meted out to the deities’ in Egypt and its inherent connection with the plague of the firstborn?

EGYPTIAN ARTWORK

In his commentary on Bamidbar (*ibid.*), the Ho’il Moshe (one of the foremost disciples of the Maharshal) offers some revealing information about the *Mitzrim*, which sheds light on their ‘civility’, and clarifies the issues at hand. He reports on a common practice the ancients would engage in:

“They would take a firstborn, slaughter him, and salt him. They would insert a piece of gold under his tongue, upon which was inscribed a certain demonic name, in order to harness the impure spiritual forces. Then, they would hang this body on the wall, light candles before it, and prostrate themselves in front of it. Through the offices of black magic, the corpse would begin to speak...”

Offering a very innovative explanation, the Ho’il Moshe contends that these human wall- furnishings — which were firstborn Egyptians — were affected by the tenth plague, together with the rest of the *b’chorim*. Although already dead, they were nevertheless being sustained in some dark, spiritual way. During the plague, they fell off the wall, lost their power, and were consequently buried by the grieving and bewildered Egyptians.

In other words, they were technically ‘deities’, as they were used in some bizarre, idolatrous manner. This aspect, however, was merely tangential, as far as the plague was concerned. The judgment meted out to them was more on account of their firstborn status, than the fact that they were being worshipped.

The meaning of the verse, as well as the firstborn/deity connection, is much clearer. The Torah’s intent is to highlight the fact that *all* firstborn were affected by the plague — whether they were regular people, or had been turned in to some type of ‘deified’ souvenir.

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