

Parshas Bamidbar 5771

RETROACTIVE DANGER

One of the central events of the Exodus saga concerns the plague of the first-born, wherein Hashem slayed the Egyptian first-born while sparing those of the Jewish people. The magnitude of this episode is evidenced by the fact that it is reflected in the very name of the holiday and its chief sacrifice; as the Mishnah states (*Pesachim 10:5*):

פסח, על שום שפסח המקום על בתי אבותינו במצרים.

“The Pesach (sacrifice is brought) on account of the fact that the Omnipresent One ‘passed over’ (פסח) the houses of our forefathers in Egypt (during the final plague).”

Through this monumental event, the first-born Israelites became consecrated to Hashem, Who “earned” them when He passed them over. As the verse in this week’s *parshah* relates (*Bamidbar 3:13*): “For to Me belongs every first-born; in the day that I smote every first-born (Egyptian)... I have sanctified to Me every first-born amongst Yisrael.” Institutions such as the obligation upon a father to redeem his first-born son are outgrowths of this idea.

The recurring theme seems to be that because of this gracious act that the first-born of Yisrael were “skipped over” and “saved,” they have become the special “possessions” of the G-d Who spared them. Yet, when we take a step back, there seems something puzzling about this whole notion. Considering them “spared” implies that they had been subject to imminent peril, as if the expectation was that the Jews were to be included

in the plague. Were that to be the case, the immense and eternal debt of gratitude owed to their Savior would surely be appropriate; but why, indeed, *is* that the case? From where does this assumption – that the first-born Israelites were inherently subject to the decree of that night – arise?

The Chasam Sofer (*Toras Moshe, parshas Bamidbar*) provides a most edifying explanation; to appreciate his words, though, it may be necessary to first revisit certain fundamental ideas.

HOW THE UNIVERSE WORKS

In a previous edition of *Mishnas Chayim (Acharei Mos 5768)*, we discussed the basic “system” through which Hashem conducts His world (based on the writings of the classical commentators, such as the Abarbanel). In its most basic sense, the “method” known as “*teva*” (usually loosely rendered as “nature”) comprises a system in which spiritual emanations originating from on High filter down through a network of celestial entities (both angelic and astronomic), eventually impacted the world’s creatures and events. This system – along with everything in the universe – was created by Hashem and functions under His sole control.

Although the particulars of this orchestration of world events are esoteric and beyond our comprehension, for our purposes, we focus now on the fact that (in some sense) the constellations (“*mazalos*”) form a significant part of this arrangement. In general, there is some association between the stars and their celestial angelic counterparts. Based on certain factors (such

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as time, locale, nationality, etc.) a given constellation/angelic combination may be dominant. (The ancients were quite aware of this system, but were led astray, attributing power to the *mazalos* themselves, and even worshipping them [Cf. Rambam, *Hilchos Avodas Kochavim*, 2:3].)

In Egypt, *mazal t'leh* (sheep) was the dominant constellation (and considered sacred to the Egyptians). Far from some random act, the choice of inflicting the plague on the first-born was quite deliberate; the idea being, Hashem was nullifying Egypt's vaunted protector: the *mazal t'leh*, who – like a first-born child – occupied the most prestigious position in Egypt's hierarchy. By smiting the first-born in Egypt, Hashem was, in effect, smashing the *mazal t'leh* itself, and all who looked to it for protection.

As stated previously, this whole event should not have had any real bearing on *b'nei Yisrael*; that is, so long as they did not subject themselves to, or lend too much credence, to the *mazal t'leh*.

TRUE COLORS REVEALED

In truth, the first-born Israelites could have correctly claimed that they should not be subject to the plague of the first-born because they did not rely on the chief of the *mazalos* (who was the real target of the evening). But then they gave themselves away.

The sin of the golden calf is yet another weighty subject, deserving of full treatment by itself. One point we focus on now is the worshippers' particular choice of image: of all things, why did they choose a cow? According to the Ramban, their decision was based upon their location at the time, as they were situated in the desert of Shur (שׁוּר). They assumed that the place was so called because it was under the guidance of the *mazal shor* (שׁוּר [ox]).

Once they conducted themselves in this manner – explains the Chasam Sofer – the “game was up” (paraphrased). By deferring to the *mazal shor*, the nation revealed that they actually did consider the power of the *mazal* chiefs. In this aspect, then, they truly were not so different than their Egyptian masters, warranting their inclusion in the plague against the chief *mazal* and its adherents. Only through a tremendous display of Divine Mercy were they spared – furnishing an eternal debt of gratitude and a cause for celebration throughout the generations.

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