

Kindly take a moment to study MISHNAS CHAYIM in the merit of
Shayna Leah *bas* Alter Binyomin *a”h*
a fellow Jew who passed away with no relatives to arrange Torah study on behalf of her *neshamah*

Stop the World – it’s *Chatzos!*

PARSHAS BO 5777

There appears to be a discrepancy regarding the timing of the climactic plague, *Makkas Bechoros* (Plague of the Firstborn). When Moshe announces the upcoming event in this week’s *parshah*, he avoids pinpointing a specific time, merely stating instead that it would occur *בְּחֶצֶת הַלַּיְלָה* – “around midnight” (*Shemos 11:4*). When relating the actual execution, however, the Torah does employ exactitude in the matter, as it states: *וַיְהִי בְּחֶצֵי הַלַּיְלָה וַד’ הִכָּה* – “And it was **in the middle of the night**, and Hashem smote every firstborn in the land of Mitzrayim” (*Ibid. 12:29*). The implication seems to be that it was precisely midnight. Why, then, did Moshe hesitate to commit to an exact time?

In clarifying the issue, Rashi (*Ibid. 11:4*) explains that Moshe wanted to forestall any potential claims on the part of Pharaoh and his associates. Even when aiming for exactitude, people tend to miss the mark a bit. Thus, Moshe was concerned; if he predicted the plague would arrive at exactly midnight – and even if it actually took place at that very time – perhaps Pharaoh’s advisors would be imprecise in their own calculations. As such, they would pounce on this as an excuse to say that Moshe’s prediction did not materialize as promised. So as not to open the door to any such pettiness, Moshe simply announced the general time: it would arrive “around midnight.” But when Hashem, obviously capable of precision, brought the actual plague, it did take place at the exact moment of midnight.

But even here the matter may not be as simple as it appears. Such emerges from some further probing into the issue of “precision timing.”

Bein Ha’Shemashos (Twilight)

This matter comes to light when examining a well-known teaching concerning the order of Creation. The Mishnah states (*Avos 5:6*):

עֲשָׂרָה דְּבָרִים נִבְרָאוּ בְּעֶרֶב שֶׁבֶת בֵּין הַשְּׁמָשׁוֹת, וְאֵלוֹ הֵן, פִּי הָאָרֶץ, וּפִי הַבְּאֵר, וּפִי הָאֵתוֹן...

“Ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath during the twilight period (i.e., right before the onset of the Sabbath), and they are: The mouth of the ground (that swallowed Korach’s company), the mouth of the well (that supplied the drinking needs of Yisrael in the desert), the mouth of the donkey (that spoke to Bilaam)...”

Now, the first chapter of the Torah is relatively explicit in delineating the items created on each of the six days of Creation: The Heavens on the first day, the firmament on the second, etc. And yet, we do not seem to find any mention in the narrative of the items contained in the Mishnah’s substantive list. Wouldn’t it be expected for there to be at least some reference to them?

Actually, contends the Vilna Ga’on (Commentary to *Avos*), there is. The Ga’on attributes the Mishnah’s derivation as stemming from an apparent discrepancy in the *pessukim* regarding

the completion of Creation. The *passuk* testifies that Hashem desisted from “Creation work” on the seventh day: וַיִּשְׁבֹּת בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מִכָּל מְלַאכְתּוֹ -- “And He rested on the seventh day from all of His work” (*Bereishis* 2:2). However, the first half of that very same verse seems to imply otherwise:

וַיִּכַּל אֱלֹהִים בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי מְלַאכְתּוֹ – “And G-d finished His work **on the seventh day.**” This appears to indicate that the work was completed within the course of the seventh day itself! Could it be, G-d forbid, that work was performed on Shabbos? The Ga’on explains that it is from here that Chazal understood that Hashem engaged in Creation during this twilight period. It would be impossible for a person to calculate down to the precise second, working until (literally) the last possible moment of the weekday. Such can only be accomplished by Hashem, who engaged in Creation until the very last moment of the sixth day. To a person, it would appear that some of Creation actually occurred on Shabbos itself; but in reality, it took place only while it was still the sixth day. With the completion of the sixth day, all work stopped completely.

The *Chatzos* Issue

Some commentators (e.g., the Brisker Rav, quoted in *K’motzei Shalal Rav*) relate this idea also to the smiting of the firstborn at precisely *chatzos*. The truth is, it is impossible for there even to exist such an institution as “midnight.” That is, there is no point in time that can be identified as the exact “second” of midnight. For if it “lasts” for one second, it can be broken down further into two halves of a second. And each of these halves can be further halved – and so on and so forth. Thus, when referring to the “midpoint” of the night, it would seem that there really is no such thing. What does it mean, then, that Hashem slew them at that precise moment? The Brisker Rav explains that, in fact, death also has no real duration; rather, one moment a person is alive, and the next, he is deceased. And so it was that on one side of the “midpoint” the Egyptian firstborn were still alive, while on the other side of that point, they were no longer.

But the Radvaz has another take on this matter, as he puts forth a truly fascinating assertion. In his responsa (*vol. II, § 814*) the Radvaz states that in this instance, Hashem did indeed slay the firstborn at *precisely* midnight. According to the previous approach, there is no such real entity as “midnight,” just as there is no time duration for the act of death. A person is simply alive one second, and the next second he is not. The night is divided into two equal parts: the firstborn were alive until the last moment of the first half, but during the very first moment of the second half, they were simply no longer alive. But the Radvaz maintains that on the night of Pesach, Hashem – the “*Kol Yachol*” (Omnipotent) – facilitated *an actual moment of midnight*. And He did so in a (relatively) simplistic way – by temporarily halting the revolution of the globe. Thus, time “stopped” for a moment; and it was during this moment of midnight that *Makkas Bechoros* came to fruition.

Mishnas Chayim is brought to you by **Chevrah Lomdei Mishnah**, a network of Torah scholars dedicated to bringing the merits of Mishnah study to the greater Jewish public. Encompassing Mishnah, Gemara, and variety of other services, **Chevrah Lomdei Mishnah** primarily assists mourners interested in acquiring the merit of Torah study for their loved ones.

Contact us at 732-364-7029 or at www.ChevrahLomdeiMishnah.org.