

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

Escaping Pollution

PARSHAS VA'EIRA 5778

Something unusual, it would seem, takes place in connection with *barad* (hail), one of the plagues featured in this week's *parshah*.

Demoted Deities

The Torah relates how Pharaoh was chastened and even seemingly contrite as a result of the terror and devastation his nation suffered in this plague: וַיִּשְׁלַח פַּרְעֹה וַיִּקְרָא לְמֹשֶׁה וּלְאַהֲרֹן וַיֹּאמֶר אֲלֵהֶם הֲטֹאתִי הַפֶּעַם ד' הַצַּדִּיק וְאֲנִי וְעַמִּי הַרְשָׁעִים, הֲעֵתִירוּ אֵל ד' וְרַב מִהֵלֵת קֹלֶת אֲלֵקִים וּבָרַד וְאֲשִׁלַּח אֶתְכֶם – “And Pharaoh sent and called for Moshe and Aharon, and he said to them: ‘I have sinned this time; Hashem is the Righteous One, while I and my nation are the wicked ones. Entreat Hashem, such that it shall be enough of the G-dly noises and the hail; and so I shall release you’” (*Shemos 9:27,28*). Moshe responded that he would oblige Pharaoh, but not immediately: וַיֹּאמֶר אֵלָיו מֹשֶׁה כִּצְאֹתִי אֶת־הָעִיר אֶפְרָשׁ אֶת־כַּפֵּי אֵל ד' – “And Moshe said to him: ‘When I exit the city I shall spread my hands (in prayer) to Hashem...’” (*Ibid. v. 29*).

As to the slight delay, Rashi addresses why it is that Moshe would pray only upon leaving the city limits. He attributes this to the presence of idolatry in the city, rendering the location unfit for prayer. But this gives rise to another question: Egypt did not just become an idolatrous nation overnight. Why, then, did this matter become a concern specifically during the plague of *barad*? Seemingly, this issue existed over the course of all the plagues!

The *Da'as Zekeinim* explains that there was, indeed, something unique about this specific plague. He reminds us that the deity that the Egyptians worshipped was the sheep – which, indeed, are usually located in the pasture land outside of the city. However, in warning of the approaching plague, Moshe himself issued a call for the livestock to be sheltered and brought inside: וְעַתָּה שְׁלַח הָעֹז אֶת־מִקְנֶךָ וְאֵת כָּל־אֲשֶׁר לְךָ בַּשָּׂדֶה כָּל־הָאָדָם וְהַבְּהֵמָה אֲשֶׁר־יִמְצָא בַּשָּׂדֶה וְלֹא יֵאָסֹף – “And now, send for your livestock to be gathered in, together with all that you have in the field; any man or beast that shall be found in the field and not gathered into the house – upon them the hail shall fall, and they shall perish” (*Ibid. v. 19*). And so, indeed, it was specifically at this time that the idols of Mitzrayim were present in the city.

Others, however, contend that Moshe prayed outside the city in connection with all of the other plagues, as well, to escape the environs of idolatry. Why, then, did Moshe feel the need to announce the matter in this instance only? R' Asher Weiss (*Minchas Asher, Haggadah Shel Pesach*) offers a novel insight on this issue. He explains that there was actually a special reason in this particular situation to think that he would *not* have to exit the city. This idea is based on a halachic concept contained in the Mishnah (*Avodah Zarah 4:4*), which states:

נְכָרִי מְבִטֵל עֲבוּדָה זָרָה שְׁלוֹ וְשֵׁל חֵבְרוֹ.

“A gentile is able to nullify his idol, as well as that of his neighbor.”

Items that have been worshipped in an idolatrous fashion become “*assur b’hana’ah*” – that is, it is prohibited to derive benefit from them. What the notion of “*bittul*” (nullification) states is that a gentile actually has the power (somewhat similar to the concept of nullifying *chametz* [leaven] before Pesach) to remove this prohibition by declaring an acknowledgement that the idol is indeed powerless and futile.

As such, R’ Weiss explains, there was reason to think that the idols of Mitzrayim at this point had been nullified, as a result of Pharaoh’s declaration (cited above) proclaiming his recognition – a result of the terror of the *barad* – of Hashem’s righteousness and the folly of his own ways. If this would be considered a bona fide “*bitul*,” it would seem that Moshe could then remain to pray even within the city, as the deities therein had been effectively “de-activated” in a halachic sense. Moshe thus felt the need to disabuse this notion, which he did by announcing that even in this instance he would be exiting the city. Apparently, Moshe felt that Pharaoh’s *bitul* was insincere; he was only paying lip-service in order to have the *barad* stopped, while in his heart he harbored the same corrupt sentiments as always. As Moshe proceeded to tell him: וְאֵתָהּ וְעַבְדֶּיךָ יָדַעְתִּי כִּי טָרָם תִּירְאוּן מִפְּנֵי ד' אֱלֹהִים – “And regarding you and your servants, I know that you have not yet come to exhibit fear before Hashem Who is G-d” (*Shemos 9:30*).

Clean Environment

There is another matter worthy of clarification regarding this issue. Granted that the idols of Mitzrayim retained their status as “active” idols; but did Moshe really have to leave the city limits? Wouldn’t it have been sufficient to merely designate a certain area or house as an “idol-free zone” to enable Moshe to pray within?

R’ Baruch Ber Leibowitz – primary disciple of R’ Chaim Soloveitchik of Brisk and a phenomenal Torah scholar in his own right – explains that it was indeed necessary for Moshe to absent himself from the entire city. For the spiritual pollution emanating from idolatry pervades its entire surroundings. Anyone with a truly pristine soul will detect such defilement to the extent that it would adversely affect his ability to pray.

R’ Baruch Ber related an incident he heard from his own *rebbe* – involving the latter’s father – illustrating this notion. R’ Chaim’s illustrious father, of course, was R’ Yosef Dov Soloveitchik, known as the “Beis Halevi” for his magnum opus. It happened once that the Beis Halevi was passing through a certain place when he felt a sudden surge of discomfort. “I detect the presence of severe *tumah* (impurity) here.” Subsequent inquiries turned up the fact that years earlier a church had been housed at that very location (*Haggadah Shel Pesach* “*Arzei Ha’levanon*”).

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