**S.A.L.T – PARASHAT BO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

 Before the final plague, the plague of the firstborn, in response to which Pharaoh and the Egyptians sent *Benei Yisrael* out of Egypt, Moshe conveyed to Pharaoh the prophecy predicting the deadly plague. He announced that cries of grief and terror would be sounded throughout Egypt, but among *Benei Yisrael*, “*lo yecheratz kelev leshono*” – not even the barking of dogs would be heard, “so that you know that the Lord distinguishes between Egypt and Israel” (11:7), The contrast between the peaceful silence in *Benei Yisrael*’s communities, and the shrieks of terror sounded by the Egyptians, would prove that God was punishing Egypt for its cruelty towards *Benei Yisrael*.

 The Midrash (*Mekhilta* to Shemot 22:30; *Shemot Rabba* 31:8) draws an association between this verse and a verse later in Sefer Shemot (22:30) regarding the prohibition of *tereifa*, forbidding eating the meat of a mortally ill or wounded animal. The Torah prohibits partaking of such meat, requiring instead that it be left for the dogs (“*la-kelev tashlikhun oto*”). This command, the Midrash comments, was issued as a “reward” granted to the dogs for keeping silent on the night of the Exodus. The dogs restrained their natural tendency to bark in fulfillment of God’s will, and so they were rewarded by receiving *tereifa* meat which is forbidden for human consumption.

 How might we understand the meaning and significance of this “reward” given to the dogs for their silence?

 The *Tur* (*Peirush Ha-Tur*) explains that, as the Torah explicitly states (11:6, 12:29), the plague of the firstborn affected not only the Egyptians themselves, but also their firstborn animals, such that there were animal carcasses strewn throughout Egypt. Normally, the *Tur* writes, dogs excitedly bark upon smelling the scent of carcasses, and they rush to partake of the meat. In fulfillment of God’s will, however, *Benei Yisrael*’s dogs that night remained quiet and still. They were thus rewarded by being given meat which the Torah deemed forbidden for human beings. According to the *Tur*, then, the Midrash here speaks of the value of discipline and restraint in regard to our physical urges and impulses. It teaches that just as the dogs were called upon to exercise restraint when smelling the scent of fresh meat, we, too, must at times restrain our natural inclinations for the sake of fulfilling God’s will.

 We might, however, suggest an additional explanation of the Midrash’s comments, by considering the purpose of this miracle of the dogs’ silence on the night of the Exodus. God had the animals remain quiet and still in order to underscore the stark contrast between *Benei Yisrael*, who were protected and cared for by God, and the Egyptians, whom God severely punished for their crimes. The dogs’ silence that night represent the aura of serenity that we are to maintain even as there is “noise” and panic all around us, trusting in God’s protection. Like dogs, we often feel naturally inclined to “bark” – to become agitated, aggrieved, anxious or tense. But as *Benei Yisrael*, chosen by God to become His special nation, we are expected to live, as best we can, with composure and dignity, confident that we are being cared for by the Almighty. Just as the dogs’ silence in Egypt brought honor to *Benei Yisrael*, who experienced peace and tranquility as the Egyptians grieved, similarly, we bring honor to our nation when we avoid “barking,” when we refrain from unnecessary aggravation and anxiety, and instead maintain our composure even under difficult conditions, trusting that, like our ancestors on the night of the Exodus, we are under God’s special protection. The reward given to the dogs, then, teaches us of the great important of serenity, of remaining calm and confident, and placing our trust in God under all circumstances.

Sunday

 The Torah in Parashat Bo presents numerous laws relevant to the *korban pesach* – the special sacrifice offered on the afternoon of the 14th of Nissan, commemorating the original sacrifice offered by *Benei Yisrael* on the eve of the Exodus. These include the prohibition of “*etzem lo tishberu vo*,” which forbids breaking any bone of the sheep offered as the *korban pesach*. This prohibition is listed among the 613 Biblical commands (Rambam, *Sefer Ha-mitzvot*, *lo ta’aseh* 121; *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, 20).

 The *Sefer Ha-chinukh*, in explaining the reason underlying this prohibition, writes, “It is not honorable for princes and dignitaries to drag bones and break them like dogs. Doing so is appropriate only for the poorest among the nation who are hungry.” As we celebrate the Exodus, the *Chinukh* explains, we must conduct ourselves in a respectable, noble and dignified manner, and so we must refrain from breaking the bones of the *pesach* sacrifice. People would often break open the bones when eating meat in order to retrieve the marrow, but doing so gives the appearance of poverty and desperation, as though we need to scavenge for every morsel of nourishment we can find. Therefore, on Pesach, when we are to conduct ourselves as members of nobility, celebrating our having been chosen by God as His treasured nation, we must eat like wealthy noblemen, and not like desperate paupers.

 The *Tur* (in *Peirush Ha-Tur*) offers an additional approach, associating this prohibition with the fact that the *korban pesach* was normally eaten in groups. As the Torah forbids leaving over meat from the sacrifice until the next morning, families would generally join together to offer a *korban pesach* collectively. The *Tur* writes that if the Torah permitted breaking the bones to access the marrow, then members of a group would find themselves dividing the bones, to ensure everyone received a precisely equal share. In order to obviate the need to divide the animal’s bones, the Torah simply forbade breaking bones of the *pesach* sacrifice.

 The *Tur* does not explain why the Torah did not want groups to have to divide the bones among themselves. The likely reason, as some have suggested, is that dividing the bones gives an appearance of pettiness that is unbefitting members of royalty, as we are to see ourselves on Pesach. Preoccupation with such trivialities, ensuring that no individual’s share slightly exceeds another’s, is childish, and unbecoming of *Am Yisrael*, who were taken from Egypt and brought to Sinai to be “a kingdom of priests and a sacred nation.” The “regal” quality that ought to characterize the celebration of the Exodus on Pesach must be expressed not only in luxury and comfort, but also in maturity, in a standard of conduct that is rational, sensible and refined.

 The *Tur*’s understanding of this prohibition reminds us that membership in God’s special nation demands, perhaps before anything else, that we avoid petty, petulant behavior. We must live with an ambitious sense of mission that automatically prevents us from preoccupying ourselves with trivialities and from feeling slighted and aggrieved by minor, inconsequential infractions. As members of “royalty,” we should regard our time and our attention as too precious to be wasted on, and our dignity too important to be compromised by, petty and childish bickering.

Monday

 We read in Parashat Bo of Pharaoh’s servants’ petition to Pharaoh that he heed Moshe’s warning of the impending plague of locusts, and agree to release *Benei Yisrael* in order to avoid the catastrophe. Pharaoh responded by summoning Moshe and Aharon back to the palace, and expressed his willingness to let *Benei Yisrael* leave, asking which members of the nation needed to go. Moshe responded, “We will go with our young and with our old; with our sons and with our daughters…for we have a festival for the Lord” (10:9) – emphasizing that the entire nation would be leaving. Pharaoh scornfully dismissed Moshe’s response, insisting that he would allow only the adult males to leave.

 Rav Baruch Hager of Seret, in *Mekor Barukh*, finds symbolic significance in Moshe’s emphatic pronouncement, “*Bi-n’areinu u-vi-zkeineinu neileikh*” – “We will go with our young and with our old.” One of the most basic and important differences between youth and adulthood is the contrast between youthful impulsivity and the patience and prudence of mature adults. Youngsters, generally, are bursting with energy and enthusiasm, and are eager to act on impulse, without taking the time to carefully weigh and measure their options to determine the best course of action. Adults, meanwhile, are usually far more cautious and deliberate. But while there is certainly value in exercising caution and patience, this oftentimes comes at the expense of zeal, passion and ambition. Appropriate caution can easily evolve into excessive caution, which results in stagnancy and complacency. If we think too much before acting, we might never act, and we will then never achieve. Our wariness and discretion must not erode our idealism and ambition; although we must think patiently to avoid doing something we shouldn’t do, we must avoid overthinking that could prevent us from doing something which we should do.

 Moshe’s pronouncement, “*Bi-n’areinu u-vi-zkeineinu neileikh*” thus perhaps may be seen as representing the need for this balance between the impatience of youth and the cautiousness of adulthood. *Benei Yisrael* could not leave Egypt and embark on their historical mission with only one or the other, because the service of God requires both passionate zeal and excitement, on the one hand, and careful, patient consideration and planning, on the other. If we allow our passion to overtake our reason, we are bound to make grave mistakes and fail; but if we exercise patience and caution without ambition, fervor and enthusiasm, we will likely fall into complacency and passivity. Moshe therefore insisted, “*Bi-n’areinu u-vi-zkeineinu neileikh*,” that we proceed with a delicate balance between the vigor of youth and the wariness of adulthood, to ensure that we accomplish all that we are capable of accomplishing, while avoiding irresponsible impulsivity. (Interestingly, the *Mekor Barukh* adds that Moshe specifically mentioned “*bi-n’areinu*” in this verse before “*vi-zkeineinu*” because at the time of the Exodus, youthful passion and zeal were more critical than patience and cautiousness, and so precedence needed to be given to “*bi-n’areinu*.”)

Tuesday

 We read in Parashat Bo of the exchange between Moshe and Pharaoh after Moshe warned the king about the impending plague of locusts, when Pharaoh was begged by his servants to yield, and allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave. Pharaoh informed Moshe that he was giving his consent, until Moshe demanded that the entire nation – including the men, women and children – be allowed to leave Egypt and serve God in the wilderness. At that point, Pharaoh again stubbornly refused, adding, “*Re’u ki ra’a neged peneikhem*” – “See, there is evil ahead of you” (10:10).

 Rashi famously cites an interpretation of this verse from the Midrash (in his commentary to Sefer Yehoshua 5:9, Rashi cites this interpretation in the name of Rabbi Moshe Ha-darshan), explaining that Pharaoh refers here to a “star” named “*ra’a*” (“evil”). According to the Midrash, Pharaoh was telling Moshe, “I see through my astrology that this star is rising to greet you in the desert, and it portends blood and carnage.” This astrological prediction was partially correct, Rashi writes, except that God “transformed the blood into the blood of circumcision.” Pharaoh accurately predicted the spilling of *Benei Yisrael*’s blood after leaving Egypt – only that they were not killed, but rather underwent circumcision after crossing into the Land of Israel (Yehoshua 5:3), and the bleeding caused by this procedure was the “bloodshed” which Pharaoh had predicted would be suffered by *Benei Yisrael*.

 What might be the meaning of Pharaoh’s astrological warning, and of the “transformation” of the blood of murder to the blood of circumcision?

 At times we might hear the voice of “Pharaoh” in our minds warning us, “*Re’u ki ra’a neged peneikhem*” – that embarking on a life of service and devotion to God is “evil,” and can bring us “death,” destroying our hopes for a happy, fulfilling life. Just as Pharaoh tried to end *Benei Yisrael*’s hopes of freedom by trying to convince them that their journey from Egypt would end in disaster, we, too, might occasionally have fears about the outcome of our religious journey, our quest for a connection with God and to live in His service. This journey could appear frightening, or seem to threaten to deny us joy and satisfaction. Like Pharaoh’s warning, these discouraging thoughts are partially true. The path of religious observance indeed demands a degree of sacrifice, similar to *berit mila* – the ritual of circumcision, which symbolizes a Jew’s willingness to make sacrifices for the sake of the Almighty. If the “Pharaoh” within us tries to frighten us away from religious devotion, warning that it spells the end of a happy, meaningful, productive and fulfilling life, we must respond by “transforming” these predictions of gloom in our minds into “*berit mila*” – a recognition, awareness and embrace of the sacrifices required by Torah life. Committing ourselves to God, as *Benei Yisrael* did at the time of the Exodus, does not condemn us to a life of hardship and misery. It requires only “*berit mila*,” some degree of sacrifice, and specifically by making these sacrifices, we experience great joy and fulfillment.

It is understandable to have hesitations about “leaving Egypt” – ending our “subservience” to mundane commitments for the sake of committing ourselves to God. Such a commitment might strike us as too demanding. The Midrash here teaches us to draw a distinction between “death” and “circumcision,” to recognize that making sacrifices does not deny us meaning and satisfaction, and, to the contrary, actually helps us experience meaning and satisfaction.

Wednesday

 We read in Parashat Bo that after Moshe warned Pharaoh of the plague of locusts, Pharaoh expressed willingness to yield and allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave – as long as this included only the adult males, and the women and children remained in Egypt (10:10-11). Moshe, however, insisted that the entire nation must be allowed to leave – including the men, women and children, and even the animals (10:9). Later, after the plague of darkness, Pharaoh summoned Moshe and announced that he was prepared to allow all the people to leave – but he demanded that the nation’s herds remain in Egypt (10:24). Moshe refused the offer, responding that *Benei Yisrael* needed to take all their animals with them, to the point where not a single “hoof” would remain in Egypt – and even the Egyptians would give them animals to bring with them. The reason, Moshe explained, was because they were going to serve God, “and we will not know with what we will serve God until we arrive there” (10:26). Pharaoh refused, and drove Moshe away from the palace, warning him to never return.

 Rav Yaakov Yehuda of Nadarzyn, in *Yashreish Yaakov*, notes the deeper significance of this exchange, and of Moshe’s insistence that all members of the nation, and all their herds, join in leaving Egypt to become God’s special nation and serve Him. Pharaoh sought to impose limits on religious commitment, arguing that it is not all encompassing. He contended that *Benei Yisrael* did not need to include their families or their mundane lives (represented by their cattle) in their service of God, because, in his view, religious life can and should remain separate and apart from one’s personal and professional life. Moshe therefore forcefully emphasized that *Benei Yisrael* would be leaving with every single part of the nation – every person, and even every “hoof,” down to the very last piece of property. Devotion to God encompasses the totality of a person’s life, and therefore when we make a commitment to serve Him, we cannot leave anything behind. Every “hoof,” every aspect of our lives, is included as we embark on our journey to devote ourselves to God’s service.

 Moshe also stresses that “we will not know with what we will serve God until we arrive there.” We must be prepared to serve and make sacrifices for God without any restriction. There are no aspects of our lives that we can declare “off limits” to religion. We never know what sacrifices we might be called upon to make for the sake of *mitzvot*, and what challenges we will be called upon to overcome. At no time do we know with certainty “with what we shall serve God,” what specific forms of service will be required. We must be unlimitedly and unconditionally prepared to sacrifice to and serve the Almighty, with the realization that the entirety of our lives must be devoted to Him, without any exception.

Thursday

 After hearing Moshe’s warning of the locusts that would descend upon Egypt, Pharaoh told Moshe that he was willing to release *Benei Yisrael*, until Moshe informed Pharaoh that the entire nation – men, women and children – would need to leave, explaining, “*ki chag Hashem lanu*” – “we have a festival to the Lord” in the wilderness (10:9). Pharaoh then ridiculed Moshe, saying, “So may the Lord be with you when I send you with your children” – mocking what he deemed a preposterous demand that the children must leave with the adults in order to participate in the religious occasion which *Benei Yisrael* wished to observe.

 Maharil Diskin explains Pharaoh’s cynical response as reflecting his belief that children have no place in an ambitious religious experience. Moshe told Pharaoh that *Benei Yisrael* needed to leave Egypt for the purpose of “*chag Hashem*” – celebrating together with the Almighty. This lofty goal, Pharaoh responded, is suitable only for God-fearing adults, not for simple people, and certainly not for children. Maharil Diskin suggests that this is the meaning of the words, “*Yehi khein Hashem imakhem*” (literally, “So may the Lord be with you”). Moshe was asking Pharaoh to grant *Benei Yisrael* the opportunity to experience God’s presence, to celebrate a special moment of closeness with the Almighty, and Pharaoh therefore flatly rejected the demand to include the children – who, in Pharaoh’s mind, had no reason to participate in such an event. A lofty experience of this nature, Pharaoh insisted, is not something for the entire nation to take part in, and is reserved exclusively for the elite.

 According to Maharil Diskin, then, Moshe’s demand that the entire nation be allowed to leave and observe a “festival to the Lord” reflects our firm belief that experiencing God’s presence is something to which every member of the nation must aspire. Each individual is allowed the opportunity, and is expected, to experience a relationship with God on his or her own level, in accordance with his or her own capabilities. Of course, not every person is going to experience a relationship with God the same way. But the goal of “*yehi…Hashem imakhem*,” of working to earn and feel God’s presence, is one which must be pursued, in Moshe’s words, “with our youth and with our old; with our sons and with our daughters.” We are each called upon to “leave Egypt,” to reach beyond our current condition, and strive just a little higher, to make God’s presence felt just a little stronger in our lives. No matter how small we might feel we are, we must firmly believe that God invites even us out of our personal “Egypt” to build a strong, genuine, impactful relationship with Him, each one of us on our individual level.

Friday

 After Moshe presented to *Benei Yisrael* the instructions concerning the *pesach* sacrifice which they were to offer on the night before the Exodus, he concluded by foreseeing the time when their children will ask, “*Ma ha-avoda ha-zot lakhem*” – “What is this service for you?” (12:26), inquiring about the meaning of the annual *pesach* sacrifice. The Pesach *Haggadah* famously asserts that Moshe here foresees the question posed by the “*rasha*” – the “wicked” son, who asks it sneeringly, and not in a sincere desire to learn and understand. The *Haggadah* instructs parents to answer this question with the response presented later in Parashat Bo: “It is because of this that the Lord acted for me when I left Egypt” (13:8).

 *Ketav Sofer* explains the son’s question by focusing on the word “*avoda*,” which literally means “work,” or “labor.” This son does not ridicule *mitzva* observance per se, but rather questions why the parents invested so much time, work and effort for the sake of the *pesach* offering. Moshe here foresees the child watching his parents not just enjoying the *pesach* feast, but exerting great effort in preparing for the celebration, and so he asks, “*Ma ha-avoda ha-zot lakhem*” – “Why are you working so hard?”

 The *Haggadah* instructs parents to respond, “It is because of this that the Lord acted for me when I left Egypt.” *Ketav Sofer* explains this response by noting the Midrash’s famous comment (cited by Rashi to 12:6) that God commanded *Benei Yisrael* to perform the *pesach* offering so that they could earn merits through which they would be worthy of redemption. The prophet Yechezkel (16:8), as the Midrash cites, compares God’s redemption of *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt to a man who finds an abandoned infant whom he then adopts, and Yechezkel describes how the infant was “naked and exposed” (“*eirom ve-erya*”). The Midrash explains that *Benei Yisrael* were “naked” in the sense that they had no *mitzvot* in the merit of which they could be worthy of being miraculously rescued. And so God gave them the *mitzvot* associated with the *pesach* sacrifice through which they would earn redemption. Thus, *Ketav Sofer* writes, in response to the question, “*Ma ha-avoda ha-zot lakhem*,” parents are to explain to their children that it was through the performance of *mitzvot* that our ancestors were deemed worthy of being freed. We invest immense effort and vast amounts of time into observing *mitzvot* because they are valuable and precious. It is through the performance of *mitzvot* that we become worthy of God’s special protection and assistance, and so each and every one is to be cherished, and is worth every ounce of effort and hard work entailed.

 This response to the question of “*Ma ha-avoda ha-zot lakhem*” is relevant to all the *mitzvot* we perform. Each *mitzva* offers us the opportunity to “leave Egypt,” to “free” ourselves from our current standing and rise higher. We should joyously embrace every such opportunity, and be prepared to invest the time and effort needed to properly fulfill every *mitzva* that comes our way, recognizing that each one brings us higher and closer to the Almighty, and worthier of His grace and kindness.

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