**S.A.L.T. – PARASHAT BO**

**By Rav David Silverberg**

Motzaei Shabbat

Rashi, in his commentary to Parashat Bo (10:22), writes – citing the Midrash – that the ninth plague that God brought upon Egypt, the plague of darkness, served not only to punish the Egyptians, but also as a way to conceal a plague that He brought upon *Benei Yisrael*. During the period before the Exodus, Rashi writes, “there were among Israel…wicked people and they did not wish to leave [Egypt]. They died during the three days of darkness so that the Egyptians would not see their downfall and say, ‘They, too, are being smitten, just like us.’”

The Rosh, in his Torah commentary, raises the question of why, if the evildoers among *Benei Yisrael* perished during the plague of darkness, we encounter sinful people later in the Torah. In particular, the Rosh notes Datan and Aviram, two prominent figures in Korach’s revolt against Moshe whom the Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:34) identifies as the instigators of numerous challenges to Moshe’s authority. The Midrash says that Datan and Aviram were the ones who protested at the shores of the *Yam Suf* when *Benei Yisrael* found themselves trapped against the sea, who did not trust Moshe’s prophecy about the manna and left over some of their portion for the next day, and who led the initiative to return to Egypt upon hearing the frightening report of the scouts. These wicked men survived the deadly pestilence that God unleashed against the evildoers of *Benei Yisrael* during the period of darkness in Egypt, and the question arises as to why they were deemed worthy of exclusion from this plague.

The Rosh answers, very succinctly, that although Datan and Avram were indeed wicked, they were allowed to live “because they did not despair of redemption.” God killed those among *Benei Yisrael* who had despaired, and did not believe in the brighter future that awaited the nation currently languishing under Egyptian oppression. Datan and Aviram, as evil as they were, had not despaired, and were thus allowed to survive and join the rest of the nation when they left Egypt.

We might learn from the Rosh’s brief comments the vital importance of optimism and hopefulness in Torah life. Even people as sinful as Datan and Aviram, who consistently mistrusted, suspected and challenged Moshe Rabbenu, earned God’s redemption because they did not lose all hope at a time when many others did. The Rosh here teaches that when a person does not despair, if he accepts the possibility that his life and his world can change and improve, then he has the opportunity to change and improve his life. The most dangerous evil of all is cynicism borne of despair, the feeling that humankind’s ills are permanent and the world is beyond repair. We are guaranteed the promise of redemption as long as we believe in the prospect of redemption, as long as we look to the future with hope and optimism, confident that things can, and ultimately will, change of the better. We don’t have to be perfect to be worthy of God’s assistance, but we need to trust that He is able and willing to assist us, and live with positivity and enthusiasm even in trying times.

Sunday

Yesterday, we noted the question asked by many as to why two prominent evildoers – Datan and Aviram – survived the plague of darkness which God brought upon Egypt, during which the wicked members of *Benei Yisrael* perished (Rashi, Shemot 10:22). *Chazal* (*Shemot Rabba* 1:34) identify Datan and Aviram as the instigators of several challenges to Moshe’s authority following the Exodus, and yet, they were somehow deemed worthy of surviving the plague which God unleashed against the other sinners among the nation.

The Maharil Diskin suggested an answer based on the comments of the *Midrash Tanchuma* (Vaera, 6; see Rashi to 5:20) identifying Datan and Aviram as foreman appointed to supervise the Israelite slaves. As we read in the closing verses of Parashat Shemot, Pharaoh responded to Moshe and Aharon’s initial demand that he allow *Benei Yisrael* to leave by intensifying their workload, forcing them to find straw with which to then produce bricks. The Torah tells that the Israelite foremen were beaten by the Egyptian overseers because the laborers failed to meet their quota of bricks, and the Midrash (cited by Rashi to Bamidbar 11:14) commends the foremen for enduring these beatings. They felt pity for the overworked laborers under their charge, and so they exposed themselves to the wrath of the Egyptian taskmasters rather than force their fellow Jews to meet unreasonable quotas. The Torah tells that the foremen approached Pharaoh to protest the harsh conditions to which the slaves were subjected, but Pharaoh rejected their plea. After leaving the palace, the foremen met Moshe and Aharon, and angrily berated them for making the slaves’ plight more severe. *Chazal* say that these foremen who accosted Moshe and Aharon were Datan and Aviram. It emerges, then, that although Datan and Avram were wicked men who frequently and brazenly opposed Moshe and Aharon, they were also genuinely concerned for their fellow Jews, and even endured beatings rather than enforce the unreasonable standards imposed by Pharaoh. In this merit, the Maharil Diskin explained, Datan and Aviram were spared the plague of death that befell the other sinful members of *Benei Yisrael*. As wicked as they were, they displayed genuine concern and compassion for the slaves under their charge, and for this they were spared.

The Maharil Diskin adds that this merit, significant as it was, did not suffice to save Datan and Aviram from punishment for their role in Korach’s revolt against Moshe and Aharon. As we know, God miraculously opened the ground underneath them, and they were buried alive. The Maharil Diskin writes that the sin of *machaloket*, of instigating strife and discord, is so severe that it could not be offset by the great merit of Datan and Aviram’s selflessness and compassion as foremen in Egypt. Their admirable acts of sensitivity and kindness were voided, so-to-speak, by the grievous sin they committed when they led an uprising and sowed controversy and hate among *Am Yisrael*.God was prepared to tolerate their wrongdoing in the merit of the compassion they had earlier showed to their fellow Jews, but He would not tolerate their efforts to stir fighting and dissent among His children.

Monday

Earlier this week, we noted the surprising remark of the Rosh, in his Torah commentary (Parashat Bo), regarding Datan and Aviram – two sinful members of *Benei Yisrael* who, as *Chazal* describe, repeatedly challenged Moshe and Aharon in the period following the Exodus. The Rosh writes that although, according to the Midrash, God killed the sinners among *Benei Yisrael* during the plague of darkness (see Rashi, 10:22), He spared Datan and Aviram, because “*lo nitya’ashu min ha-geula*” – they did not despair of redemption. As sinful as they were, they were spared and earned the right to leave Egypt at the time of the Exodus due to their belief in the prospect of the nation’s redemption.

The Rosh’s comment becomes especially remarkable in light of future incidents involving these two men. The Midrash (*Shemot Rabba* 1:34) lists several sins in the Torah which *Chazal* attribute to Datan and Aviram, including the protests against Moshe which the Torah later (14:11-12) describes as having been voiced at the shores of the *Yam Suf*. As the people found themselves trapped against the sea by the pursuing Egyptian army, the people turned to Moshe and said, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us to perish in the wilderness? What is this that you have done, by taking us from Egypt? Is this not what we told you in Egypt: ‘Leave us alone and let us serve Egypt, for it is preferable for us to serve Egypt than to perish in the wilderness!’?” According to the Midrash, these harsh words were spoken specifically by Datan and Aviram. It emerges, then, that just days after the Exodus, Datan and Aviram reflected upon their earlier rejection of Moshe’s leadership and of the entire plan to leave Egypt, and insisted that *Benei Yisrael* should have remained in Egypt. If this was Datan and Aviram’s reaction to the crisis at the shores of the *Yam Suf*, we may reasonably assume that they were skeptical about the prospects of redemption all throughout. And yet, the Rosh says they were worthy of surviving the plague of darkness and leaving Egypt because they had not despaired entirely of the prospects of redemption. As skeptical as they were, they fell short of complete denial and rejection, and in this merit, they were spared.

Another relevant source is a startling passage in *Targum Yonatan Ben Uziel*’s Midrashic translation of the Torah, in Parashat Beshalach (14:3). The Torah there tells of God’s command to Moshe to lead *Benei Yisrael* towards the sea in order to mislead Pharaoh into thinking that they had lost their way. God tells Moshe that after *Benei Yisrael* change directions, Pharaoh will say “*el Benei Yisrael*” – literally, “to the Israelites” – that the newly-freed slaves are lost in the desert. Rashi explains this phrase to mean that Pharaoh will make this comment not “to” *Benei Yisrael*, but rather “about” *Benei Yisrael*. *Targum Yonatan*, however, explains that Pharaoh made this remark to members of *Benei Yisrael* who remained in Egypt and did not leave with the rest of the nation during the Exodus – namely, Datan and Aviram. These two men had remained in Egypt, presumably because they mistrusted Moshe and did not believe his prophetic promises of a glorious future in *Eretz Yisrael*. This comment of *Targum Yonatan* seems to reflect a Midrashic tradition mentioned in numerous sources that Datan and Aviram did not leave Egypt at the time of the Exodus, and decided to join the rest of *Benei Yisrael* only after the miracle of the splitting of the sea. (For an in-depth discussion, see [Rav Pinchas Friedman’s essay on the topic](https://shvilei.files.wordpress.com/2015/01/beshalach-5775.pdf). It should be noted that this Midrashic tradition clearly does not accept the position mentioned earlier that Datan and Aviram were the ones who complained to Moshe at the shores of the *Yam Suf*.) If so, then Datan and Aviram were so skeptical about *Benei Yisrael*’s redemption that they refused to join the nation at the time of the Exodus. Even as Pharaoh sent the nation out of Egypt, Datan and Aviram remained, refusing to believe that this moment marked the dawn of a new, glorious era for their people. It was only after the great miracle of the splitting of the sea that they were convinced – and even then, but temporarily – that Moshe was God’s prophet sent to deliver His nation. Nevertheless, according to the Rosh, Datan and Aviram were deemed worthy of surviving the plague of darkness “because they did not despair of redemption.” They were doubtful and mistrusting, but they did not reject the notion entirely, and this sufficed to earn them protection from the plague that God sent against the other sinners of *Benei Yisrael* when He struck the Egyptians with darkness.

In short, Datan and Aviram were quite clearly skeptical about Moshe’s prophecies of redemption, yet the Rosh nevertheless noted with some slight degree of admiration that they had not despaired entirely. In searching for a source of merit for which these men were spared, the Rosh, ironically, looked specifically to the area in which they were exceedingly deficient – faith and trust in the prophecy of the Exodus – and noted that they had not failed completely. Even in regard to Datan and Aviram’s greatest flaw, the Rosh found something positive to say about them.

The Rosh’s remark perhaps reminds us to avoid assessing people in simplistic, “black-and-white” terms. Not only should we be looking at people’s positive traits, rather than focusing on their negative qualities, but we should also appreciate the limits of their negative qualities. Even if a person is generally lazy, for example, there are certainly some occasions when he can be found working diligently. Even if a person is prone to anger and intolerance, it can be assumed that at times he is forgiving and indulgent. If the Rosh could appreciate the fact that Datan and Aviram did not despair entirely of the prospects of redemption, then we can certainly appreciate the positive aspects of other people’s characters even with regard to the areas in which they are most severely flawed.

Tuesday

Towards the end of Parashat Bo (13:13), we read God’s command to *Benei Yisrael* after the Exodus to redeem their firstborn sons. As the nation’s firstborns were spared from the plague that killed the firstborn children of Egypt on the night of the Exodus, firstborns must be treated as “sacred” and thus redeemed. We fulfill this command, of course, through *pidyon ha-bein* – by giving money to a *kohen* as “redemption” for the firstborn.

The Torah formulates this command as an obligation to redeem every “*peter rechem*” – the first child born to a woman. This means that if a child has several older brothers with the same father, but he is his mother’s firstborn, he requires a *pidyon ha-bein*. Conversely, if a child is his father’s firstborn, but he has several older brothers with the same mother, he is not subject to this obligation. The Ramban, commenting earlier in Parashat Bo (12:30), notes that in light of this *halakha*, it would seem that the only Egyptian children struck by the plague of the firstborn in Egypt were those who were the firstborns of their mothers. Since the obligation of *pidyon ha-bein* commemorates, or results from, the plague that befell Egypt, it stands to reason that the obligation pertains only to the kind of firstborns who were killed on the night of the Exodus. It thus follows that on that night God killed only every woman’s first child. An Egyptian child who was his father’s firstborn but not his mother’s was, seemingly, spared from the plague.

However, the Ramban acknowledges that this is not the view taken by *Chazal*. The Midrash (*Midrash Tehillim* 105:10) comments that every firstborn Egyptian died, including both firstborns of mothers and firstborns of fathers. Accordingly, the question arises as to why the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* applies only to a “*peter rechem*” – a woman’s firstborn child. If even firstborns of fathers perished during the plague in Egypt, then why are such firstborns excluded from the obligation of *pidyon ha-bein*?

The Ramban suggests that the Torah perhaps limited the scope of this obligation because only the firstborns of mothers can be definitively and perceptibly identified as such. Moreover, the Ramban adds, the firstborn animals of the Egyptians also died on the night of the plague (12:29), and in commemoration, the firstborns of certain species of domesticated animals are deemed sacred and subject to special requirements (13:12-13). When it comes to animals, of course, it is usually impossible to identify a male’s firstborn. As such, when God decreed the concept of consecrating firstborns to commemorate the miracle that occurred in Egypt, He limited this institution to firstborns of their mothers. This standard was applied even to humans, in order to maintain a kind of uniform standard.

The question that remains unanswered by the Ramban’s analysis is why the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* does not apply to female firstborns. The Midrash elsewhere (*Shemot Rabba* 18:3) states explicitly that during the plague of the firstborn God killed even the firstborn females among the Egyptians. Yet, the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* applies only to firstborn males, not females. Seemingly, since this ritual commemorates the survival of *Benei Yisrael*’s firstborns during the plague that killed the firstborns of Egypt, it should apply to every kind of firstborn that was affected in Egypt, and should thus include females.

Tomorrow we will *iy”H* explore possible answers to this question.

Wednesday

Yesterday, we noted the fact that the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein*, which requires a father to “redeem” his firstborn son by giving money to a *kohen*, applies only in the case of a firstborn boy, and not when a firstborn is female. This *halakha* becomes difficult to understand in light of the Midrash’s comment (*Shemot Rabba* 18:3) that the plague of the firstborn that struck Egypt on the night of the Exodus killed all firstborns, male and female alike. The Torah in the end of Parashat Bo makes it clear that the obligation of *pidyon ha-bein* serves to commemorate the survival of the Israelite firstborns on the night when their Egyptian counterparts were killed, and the question thus arises as to why the Torah applies this obligation only to male firstborns.

The Chida (Rav Chaim Yosef David Azulai) offers several different answers to this question in different contexts in his writings (documented by Rav Chaim Leib Eisenstein, in [his *Peninim Mi-bei Midresha*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=48330&st=&pgnum=98)). In his [*Simchat Ha-regel* commentary to the *Haggadah*](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=10996&st=&pgnum=52&hilite=), the Chida advances the theory that the plague of the firstborn affected the various nationalities in Egypt differently. The Midrash (cited by Rashi to 12:29) comments that God that night killed even the firstborns of people of other nationalities who resided in Egypt (presumably, because they supported or participated in the enslavement of *Benei Yisrael*). However, the Chida suggests that when the aforementioned passage in the Midrash tells that the plague struck even the firstborn girls, it refers only to the firstborn girls of Egyptian women. As for the other ethnic groups residing in Egypt at the time, the plague struck only the firstborn males. The Chida explains this distinction on the basis of Kabbalistic concepts, but regardless, it emerges that only the male firstborns among *Benei Yisrael* were in danger that night, since for all foreigners in Egypt the plague struck only the firstborn boys. For this reason, the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein* applies only to firstborn males.

Elsewhere, in his [*Ge’ulat Olam* (p. 12a)](http://hebrewbooks.org/pdfpager.aspx?req=11202&st=&pgnum=25&hilite=), the Chida cites a different answer from the *Ma’aseh Rokei’ach*, who notes the Midrashic tradition that *Benei Yisrael* earned redemption in the merit of the nation’s righteous women. Whereas the males of *Benei Yisrael* were steeped in sin in Egypt and were thus unworthy of redemption, the women remained righteous and the Exodus occurred in their merit. The *Ma’aseh Rokei’ach* asserts that since the women were righteous, the female firstborns rightfully deserved to be spared the plague of the firstborns, and it was only the men who depended on God’s special grace and kindness to escape the plague. Therefore, the *mitzva* of *pidyon ha-bein*, which acknowledges the special stature of the firstborns, who were spared during the plague, applies only to male firstborns.

The Chida there in *Ge’ulat Olam* then adds another possibility, noting that the requirement of *pidyon ha-bein* is associated with the priestly status to which the firstborns were elevated at the time of the Exodus. As we read in Sefer Bamidbar (3:11-13), the firstborns were designated at the time of the Exodus to serve as the “*kohanim*,” and perform the sacrificial service, but they were later replaced by the *Leviyim*, the only tribe that did not participate in the sin of the golden calf. The requirement to “redeem” the firstborn, which relates to the special status conferred upon them on the night of the Exodus, is integrally linked to the ritual role they were to have served by virtue of that special status. Therefore, as women do not perform the *avoda*, the obligation of *pidyon ha-bein* naturally applies only to firstborn males.

Thursday

Numerous parallels exist between the story of the night of the Exodus, which we read in Parashat Bo, and the story of Lot’s rescue from Sedom, which is presented in Sefer Bereishit (chapter 19). In both instances, God brought a plague of destruction upon an evil population, miraculously sparing a select group: Lot and his family were rescued from Sedom, and *Benei Yisrael* were protected from the plague of the firstborn. Just as *Benei Yisrael* were commanded to remain at home eating *matza* on the night of the plague that befell Egypt, Lot prepared *matzot* that night for his guests (Bereishit 19:3). Indeed, Rashi comments that Lot baked *matzot* because that night was Pesach. Moreover, Lot was rescued from Sedom in the merit of his uncle, Avraham – “God remembered Avraham, and so He sent Lot from amidst the upheaval” (Bereishit 19:29) – just as *Benei Yisrael* were redeemed in the merit of the covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov – “God remembered His covenant with Avraham, Yitzchak and Yaakov” (Shemot 2:24). A literary parallel between the two accounts can be found in the phrase “*kumu tze’u*” (“Arise and leave!”), which is used both by the angels as they urged Lot and his family to leave (Bereishit 19:14), and by Pharaoh as he drove *Benei Yisrael* from Egypt in response to the plague (Shemot 12:31). The textual parallel is reinforced by the verb *m.h.m.h.* (“tarry”), which is used to describe Lot’s delayed departure from Sedom (“*va-yitmhmah*” – Bereishit 19:16) and *Benei Yisrael*’s frantic departure from Egypt (“*ve-lo yakhelu le-hitmahmei’ah*” – Shemot 12:39).

Another possible point of connection between these two events is the theme of hospitality. The city of Sedom was destroyed for its selfishness and hostility to foreigners, specifically to foreigners in need of assistance. This was underscored by the story of angels who disguised as wayfarers, whom the townspeople sought to kill for the “crime” of accepting an offer of hospitality. These guests were mistreated by the townspeople who should have shown them kindness and compassion, and were rescued while the evil city was annihilated. Similarly, *Benei Yisrael* had come to Egypt to escape the harsh drought conditions in Canaan, and while at first they were generously cared for while Yosef served as Egyptian vizier, after his death, they were viewed with suspicion, despised, humiliated and mistreated. Ultimately, the needy guests were spared while the cruel host population was stricken with a deadly plague.

It has been suggested that this final parallel underlies the theme of hospitality that features prominently in our annual observance of the *seder* night. We customarily invite guests to the *seder*, and we introduce the *maggid* section of the *seder* – the focal point of the observance – by formally extending an invitation to all those who are hungry and in need of hospitality. As we sit down around the table to commemorate, reenact and relive our ancestors’ experiences, we recall the lesson of the destruction of Sedom and Egypt, and commit ourselves to reversing their mistake. We were rescued in the merit of Avraham, whose generosity, kindness and hospitality stood in direct contrast to the cruelty and heartlessness of Sedom and Egypt. We thus begin our commemoration with a proclamation of our commitment to his legacy of generosity, and loudly announce our firm rejection of the legacy of Sedom and Egypt, our eager willingness to happily welcome and assist those in genuine need of assistance.

(Based on an [article](http://etzion.org.il/he/%D7%A4%D7%A8%D7%A9%D7%AA-%D7%91%D7%90-%D7%A4%D7%A1%D7%97-%D7%9E%D7%A6%D7%A8%D7%99%D7%9D-%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%A1%D7%97-%D7%A1%D7%93%D7%95%D7%9D) by Rav Yoel Bin-Nun)

Friday

We read in Parashat Bo of the command given to *Benei Yisrael* before the Exodus, “*Ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem rosh chadashim*” – “This month [Nissan] is for you the first of the months” (12:2). This verse has been understood as not only designating Nissan as the first month of the Jewish year, but also establishing the general system of the Jewish calendar, which is based upon the monthly sighting of the new moon.

The Gemara in Masekhet Shabbat (147b) tells the unusual story of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh, who once went to a place called Deyomeset, which is described as having been inhabited by a wealthy, pampered, indulgent society. Rabbi Elazar, the Gemara relates, fell into this community’s lifestyle, indulging in physical and material pleasures, and thus forgot his vast Torah knowledge. Upon his return, he was called to read the Torah, and that day’s reading happened to begin with the command of, “*Ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem rosh chadashim*.” Having forgotten even to read properly, Rabbi Elazar mistakenly read the words “*ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem*” as “*he-charash haya libam*” (“their heart was deaf”). He confused the letter *dalet* of “*ha-chodesh*” with the letter *reish*, which closely resembles a *dalet*. Likewise, he confused the *zayin* in the word “*ha-zeh*” with the letter *yod*, and confused the *khaf* in “*lakhem*” with the letter *bet*. His peers pitied him and prayed on his behalf, whereupon he regained his knowledge.

The Kotzker Rebbe ambiguously comments about this incident, “Meaning, even though ‘their heart was deaf,’ nevertheless, ‘this month is for you’.” It appears that the Rebbe seeks to explain the significance of Rabbi Elazar’s misreading of this verse as “*he-charash haya libam*,” but his intent is unclear.

The *mitzva* of *kiddush ha-chodesh* – designating new months based on the sighting of the new moon – has often been viewed as symbolic of the theme of renewal. The word “*chodesh*” (“month”) is derived from the word “*chadash*” (“new”), because it begins when the moon starts to renew itself. The lunar cycle reflects our remarkable capacity for change, growth and revival, that just as the moon begins to grow anew after nearly disappearing, we, too, can change course and grow regardless of how “small” and low we have become.

This is perhaps the connection between the story of Rabbi Elazar ben Arakh and the command of “*ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem*.” This is the story of a towering scholar, whose knowledge exceeded that of all his colleagues combined (Avot 2:8), who experienced a humiliating downfall. The mistake he made symbolized to the people around him that even though he became “deaf,” reaching a point where he seemed incapable of ever again accumulating knowledge, he still had the potential to rebound. In contrast to “*he-charash haya libam*,” his embarrassing, seemingly helpless state of ignorance and estrangement from Torah learning, stood the message of “*ha-chodesh ha-zeh lakhem*,” the eternal promise of the potential for growth and renewal. And thus Rabbi Elazar’s colleagues refused to despair, to resign themselves to the permanent loss of an extraordinary scholar of singular talents. They gave him encouragement and their heartfelt prayers, and indeed, like the moon, he regained his former stature and once again shone the brilliant light of Torah upon the world.

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