

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights is dedicated in loving memory of Moshe ben Yechezkel
Shraga, Mel Feit. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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13 SHEVAT

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BESHALACH

A Powerful Silence

Who is like You among the powerful, Hashem! (15:11)

The Talmud (*Gittin* 56b) uses this verse in a very novel way to describe the might of Hashem. The Talmud records the despicable acts that the wicked Titus engaged in while razing the second *Beis Hamikdosh*. After defiling the Holy of Holies in an unspeakable manner, Titus went and ran his sword through the *paroches* (the intricately woven tapestry that divided the "Holy" from the "Holy of Holies"). Hashem created a miracle and blood started pouring out from this "wound," causing Titus to foolishly believe that he killed Hashem. He then tore the *paroches* down and used it to wrap the vessels of the *Beis Hamikdosh* so that they could be carried off to Rome to display his victory.

Regarding this incident, the school of R' Yishmael taught, "Who is like You among the powerful, Hashem! This can be read as: 'Who is like you among the mute'" (the word "eileim – powerful" is written without the letter *yud* so it can be read "ilaim – mute"). In other words, Hashem made Himself like a mute; He didn't react or respond to Titus' outrageous behavior. Thus, Hashem exhibited remarkable self-control, which is the ultimate demonstration of power.

Similarly, we find the well-known Talmudic teaching (*Shabbos* 88b) regarding those who endure in silence: "Those that suffer insult yet don't respond with an insult; those that are shamed yet do not reply in response [...] upon them the Torah states, 'for those

that love Him shall be like the sun going out in its full might' (*Shofetim* 5:31)."

This analogy alludes to the Gemara (*Chullin* 60b) that recounts the creation of the sun and the moon: Originally, they were created equal in size, as the verse says, "Hashem created the great luminaries" (*Bereishis* 1:16) – implying that they were proportionate. The moon complained to Hashem that "it isn't possible to have two kings sharing one crown." To which Hashem replied, "in that case, make yourself smaller."

Throughout the whole conversation, the sun makes no comment – a remarkable display of restraint. Thus, those who suffer in silence are compared to the might of the sun.

But upon closer examination we see that the Gemara in *Shabbos* is quite different than the Gemara in *Gittin*. The Gemara in *Shabbos* indicates that those who have been insulted or shamed have a response or a sharp reply ready to be delivered, but restrain themselves. But the Gemara in *Shabbos* calls Hashem "mute." A mute is someone who has nothing to say because he is unable to speak. Where is the great display of self-control in that situation?

The Gemara in *Gittin* recounts the miracle of when Titus stabbed the *paroches* and blood came pouring out. What could possibly be the reason that Hashem made this miracle? What is the point?



Miami Edition

The only thing that requires more self-control than not responding to an insult is allowing someone to believe that you have been totally defeated. Hashem's incredible restraint in the face of Titus' terrible behavior was in letting Titus believe that Hashem had been assassinated and that Titus had won. In doing so, Hashem acted as if He were impotent instead of omnipotent. This is why Hashem was called a mute, for Hashem had acted as if He was unable to respond. That was the greatest display of Hashem's might.



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In for a Penny, in for a Pound

It was told to the king that the people had fled; and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants turned regarding the people, and they said, "What have we done that we have released the Israelites from serving us?" (14:5)

Rashi (ad loc) explains that although Moshe and Bnei Yisroel had only requested a three day "furlough," it became apparent that they weren't planning on returning. This inflamed the passions of the Egyptians who were then marshaled by Pharaoh to pursue Bnei Yisroel, which led to their catastrophic defeat when they all drowned in the Red Sea.

Rashi makes an intriguing comment as to why the Egyptians were so incensed: They were upset that they had been taken advantage of. Bnei Yisroel had asked their Egyptian neighbors to borrow valuables – in fact, Rashi explains (12:35-36) that the Egyptians insisted on giving Bnei Yisroel more than they asked for – and when it appeared that Bnei Yisroel wasn't planning on coming back to return their belongings they decided to pursue them.

But Rashi's explanation is problematic: Why does Rashi change the simple meaning of the *possuk*? The verse says explicitly that they were upset that they had freed Bnei Yisroel from slavery! Why does Rashi add another rationale as to why they decided to pursue Bnei Yisroel?

In truth, one has to ask; after suffering through a year of ten totally debilitating plagues – ten plagues that were both miraculous and clearly aimed at them for their treatment of Bnei Yisroel – how could the Egyptians possibly consider engaging Bnei Yisroel once again through battle?

In psychology, there is a well-known theory called "escalation of commitment." This refers to a pattern of behavior in which an individual or group, when faced with increasingly negative outcomes from some decision, action, or investment will blithely continue that path rather than alter their course – something that is irrational, but in alignment with decisions and actions previously made. In business this is called "throwing good money after bad."

Why would people continue to do something that is logically irrational and choose to continually ignore the increasingly negative results of their actions? Why don't they just cut their losses and move on?

The answer is that nobody wants to feel like an idiot. Admitting that you made a poor decision before also means

admitting that your judgement was faulty. Many people will do anything they can to avoid feeling that they made a foolish mistake. They will therefore pay almost any sum of money to try and show that their original decision was valid. If there is even the smallest of chances that they can salvage their original poor decision they will pour resources into that course of action in the unlikely hope that it will eventually pan out.

This is what bothered Rashi. Hashem had made the Egyptians free their slaves; essentially they had no choice as they couldn't continue to face the wrath of Hashem. They had to free their slaves, but giving them their silver, gold, and valuable articles of clothing was done of their own volition. They had not been commanded to give Bnei Yisroel anything. They had "lent" them their valuables of their own free will. They thus felt duped and foolish. The decision to pursue Bnei Yisroel was to try and rectify an issue of self-image. People will do anything they can to repair that image, often leading to their own self-destruction.



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