

INSIGHTS

Into The Weekly Parsha

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This week's Insights are dedicated in memory of Emmanuel ben Leib, Elliot Grossman. "May his Neshama have an Aliya!"

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6 SHEVAT

Based on the Torah of our Rosh HaYeshiva HaRav Yochanan Zweig

PARSHAS BO

War: What is it Good for?

And so that you may relate in the ears of your son and your son's son that I have amused Myself with Egypt [...] (10:2).

In *Parshas Eikev*, when Bnei Yisroel are on the threshold of entering Eretz Yisroel, Moshe Rabbeinu attempts to calm their fears: "Perhaps you will say in your heart, 'These nations are more numerous than I, how will I be able to drive them out? Do not fear them! Remember what Hashem your God did to Pharaoh and to all of Egypt [...]' (Devarim 7:17-18). Moshe is reminding Bnei Yisroel of the incredible miracles that Hashem performed to utterly decimate the Egyptians and free them from slavery so that upon entering Eretz Yisroel they would not be apprehensive, but rather confident of victory.

However, Moshe's strategy to calm Bnei Yisroel is difficult to understand: Moshe is speaking to Bnei Yisroel after years of wandering in the desert – the story of the Exodus and all of the incredible miracles that Hashem performed happened almost forty years prior. In fact, almost every man who had experienced the Exodus was already dead, condemned to die in the desert. Those men who were children when Bnei Yisroel left Egypt would only have vague recollections of what happened four decades earlier.

Moreover, just three months prior Bnei Yisroel had incredible victories against both Sichon and Og – whom the Torah labels the "arms of the world" (Devarim 33:26) (i.e. pillars holding up the world

– see Rashi ad loc). Instead of recalling events that had taken place 40 years ago, why wouldn't Moshe just refer to these incredible victories over Sichon and Og that were so fresh in their minds?

When the spies wanted to convince Bnei Yisroel that entering Eretz Yisroel was not going to be a cakewalk, they warned, "The Amalekites live in the land of the Negev" (Bamidbar 13:29), meaning that, assuming they would enter Eretz Yisroel from the south, the first people they would come across would be Amalek. Rashi (ad loc) points out that since they had already been attacked by the Amalekites, knowing that they would meet them again would surely drive fear into their hearts.

But this too is difficult to understand. While it's true that Bnei Yisroel had been victims of a sneaky and brutal attack by Amalek, under the leadership of Yehoshua and Moshe, Bnei Yisroel utterly destroyed them. What kind of strategy was this of the spies to try to instill fear and dread by threatening them with an opponent they had already soundly defeated?

The answer is that in war even when you win, you lose. Even victors suffer heavy damage. Before the Six Day War 50,000 graves were dug in Tel Aviv because that was the anticipated losses and they wanted to be prepared. The



United States soundly defeated the Japanese in WWII, yet there were many disastrous battles like Pearl Harbor and Iwo Jima. The strategy of the spies was to instill the anxiety of entering a war knowing that even when you win many people die and never come back home. This is why Moshe didn't bring up Sichon and Og; even though they won, it was a hard fought war.

The *possuk* in our *parsha* lays out exactly what the battle with Egyptians were to Hashem. Rashi (10:2) explains that Hashem amused himself with the Egyptians, it was like a game and He made a sport of it. This is similar to watching a cat toy with a mouse; there is never the possibility that the cat is going to lose or get hurt. It's only a matter of how long the cat wishes to amuse himself. This is what Moshe is trying to impress on Bnei Yisroel – if you're worthy Hashem will take you into Eretz Yisroel with no stress of losing battles or suffering casualties. Just as Hashem took them out of Egypt and the battle was merely an amusement, He is more than capable of bringing you into Eretz Yisroel in the same manner.

Out of Control

Moshe said, “With our youngsters and with our elders we will go, with our sons and daughters, with our flock and with our cattle shall we go [...]” He (Pharaoh) responded – “Not so! Let the men go now and serve Hashem for that is your request” (10:9-11).

This week’s *parsha* opens with Moshe threatening to once again visit upon the Egyptians a horrific plague (locusts). At the urging of his advisors, Pharaoh initially relents to let Bnei Yisroel go and serve Hashem. Pharaoh recalls Moshe and Aharon to the palace and asks them, “Go and worship Hashem your God, who exactly is going?” (10:8). Once Pharaoh hears that Moshe intends that everyone as well as all the cattle will be going on this spiritual pilgrimage, Pharaoh responds, “Not so! Let the men go now and serve Hashem for that is your request.” When Moshe holds fast to his request Pharaoh angrily chases them out of the palace.

This same scene repeats after the plague of darkness. Pharaoh summons Moshe and informs him that he will permit all the people to go and serve Hashem; only the cattle is to remain behind. Moshe responds by telling Pharaoh that not only will all of the cattle be going as well, but that Pharaoh himself will provide animals as offerings to Hashem. Needless to say, this comment does not sit well with Pharaoh and he responds by once again throwing him out of the palace along with the threat that if he ever comes back he will be put to death.

The Midrash (*Yalkut Shimoni* 182:2) gives the following parable: A lion and a variety of animals, including a fox, were

on a ship. The ship comes to a toll where a donkey was the dock master in charge of collecting the tolls from all the vessels. The donkey demands that the lion’s ship pay the toll as well. The fox protests, “What impudence! Do you not see that the king of all the animals is among us! How dare you ask us to pay the toll?” The donkey retorts, “I am only collecting the toll to bring it to the king’s treasury!” At this point, the lion asks that the ship be brought closer to the dock. He thereupon leaps from the ship and kills the donkey. The Midrash concludes that Pharaoh is the donkey, and this is what he gets for demanding a tribute from Hashem.


This Midrash is difficult to understand. The Gemara (*Sukkah* 30a) relates that a king once came to a toll and proceeded to pay the toll. His servants asked him, why are you paying the toll when the proceeds from tolls belong to you anyway? The king responded that if someone sees him not paying the toll then others might learn from him that it is acceptable not to pay it. Therefore, he wanted to pay it. In essence, it seems necessary that the king pay the toll. Why then did the lion kill the donkey for his impertinence?

Most disputes are about control. This is particularly true in family relationships and disharmony in marriage. The

circumstances that created the problem are rarely the essence of the issue. The real point of contention is invariably control.

The Gemara is saying that, of course, the king can decide if he wants to pay the toll. If he has a valid reason to pay the tax he is entitled to do so because he can do whatever he wants. However, the Midrash faults the donkey for trying to control the interaction with the king of the animals. He is trying to exert his own control by saying that he has to collect the tax in order to give it back to the king. The fact that he has the impudence to demand the tax from the king means that he doesn’t really submit to the fact that the king is the one to decide whether or not he wants to pay the tax. For that, he deserves to be put to death.

The same is true for Pharaoh. Even though he somewhat acknowledges that he has to submit to the will of Hashem, he constantly tries to limit Hashem’s will by placing conditions on how Bnei Yisroel are to serve Him. Of course, trying to exert his own influence means that he isn’t really submitting to the will of Hashem. Just as the donkey who tries to exert control by forcing the king to remit his own taxes pays for his impudence with his life, so too Pharaoh brought destruction upon himself and his country.



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