

The Weekly 'Hi All' by Rabbi Jeff Bienenfeld

Bo 5782

Individuals Matter

There is a well-known Midrash (Mechilta 13:18) quoted by Rashi on 13:18 that asserts that four-fifths of the Jewish People died during the Plague of Darkness with only one fifth surviving to leave Egypt. When you begin to do the numbers, there must have been millions of Jews who died, far eclipsing whatever tragedies the plagues visited upon the Egyptians. Moreover, if these deaths took place during the three days of Darkness to conceal the calamity from the Egyptians (see Rashi ad loc), how could such staggering numbers have been buried without anyone noticing?

In light of these questions among others, Rav Shimon Shwab zt"l, offers a non-literal interpretation of the Mechilta. He argues that only a relatively small number died, but had they lived, they would have given birth to millions of people over several generations. Understood this way, the real tragedy of the death of the Jews in Egypt was its long-term effect. That the Midrash stresses this consequence and chooses to speak in hyperbole provides us with this important insight - Individuals matter!

A true story which makes this very

point. Rav Shlomo Heimann zt"l, was famous for his shiurim and the energetic style of his delivery. He naturally had many students. Once, there was a heavy snow storm and only four talmidim showed up, yet Rav Heimann gave the shiur with the same lively enthusiasm as always. When his students queried why he was putting in so much effort into teaching so small a number of people, Rav Heimann replied, "I am not merely teaching four students. I am teaching all their future descendants as well."

We so often underestimate the beneficial influence we can have upon people. After all, how many people do we actually interact with on a daily basis? It's usually just family, some business associates and a few friends. What real difference can we make, and to how many? But have we ever thought that when we do a kindness for them - and I would add, even for the passing stranger as well - we are not simply benefiting them, but through them, we might very well be influencing their future progeny for the good. Indeed, have we ever reflected on the possibility that whatever commendable attributes we may possess may have originated, in part, because of some chesed done for one our forebears? Perhaps that kindness made a "game-changing" difference in his life, imprinting on his character a virtue that he was able to pass on to us.

Who knows the long term "ripple-effect" benefits we can trigger by a

good word, some affectionate attention, a favor, a smile. It may begin with helping one person, but it ultimately can affect a multitude.

Miracles in the Everyday

At our Parsha's end, we see an interesting juxtaposition of the mitzva of tefillin alongside HaShem's declaration that He took us out of Egypt with an outstretched arm. How might this be explained?

Ramban (13:16) tells us that the reason remembering the Exodus from Egypt is mentioned so many times in the Torah is to remind us that just as HaShem is capable of performing open miracles that defy the laws of nature, so too, Gd is responsible for the smaller, seemingly unnoticed miracles that occur daily. "Through the great open miracles [of the Exodus], one comes to admit the hidden miracles which constitute the foundation of the whole Torah ..."

During the Exodus narrative, one reality became quite clear. G-d is in charge - completely and alone! This became evident in the astonishing miracles that occurred. But the deeper lesson, as Ramban astutely points out, is this: It's not just about the big miracles. Every life event is comprised of a string of small miracles, often concealed, that are no less an expression of HaShem's Providence and concern for us.

Every time we place T'FILIN on our arm and head, we are acknowledging this

truth. The T'FILIN strapped on our forearm echoes HaShem's outstretched arm, an anthropomorphism for Gd's intimate involvement in the affairs of mankind. And the T'FILIN "between our eyes" beckons each of us to use our eyes to perceptively see Gd's Presence everywhere.

Each day, three times a day, in the Shemoneh Esrei, we thank G-d for "Your miracles that are with us daily..." All we need do is reflect upon the simple and normal activities that fill up a standard day. Imagine the things that could go wrong and don't. Consider the serendipity of events that surround our lives and ask yourself if it's all just chance. Think of a series of events that leads up to a joyous occasion and wonder if it's all merely a coincidence. Not so, says Ramban. In each case, there are unseen miracles that are just waiting to be noticed and then deeply appreciated. Life takes on an entirely different meaning and purpose when an individual - internalizing this powerful spiritual message - becomes consciously aware of Gd: at home, in the office, on the street, in every venue, at all times.

Counting Time from Nissan

Parshat Bo is unique in that it contains the first mitzva given to the Jewish People. That mitzva was the command to set the month of Nissan as the first of the months to begin reckoning "Jewish" time. What exactly is this supposed to mean, especially when we consider that

the month of Tishrei commemorates the creation of the world? Rav Aaron Lichtenstein zt"l, offers a fascinating insight.

It makes the world of difference whether we count our years from Creation or from the Exodus. When our frame of reference is Creation, we partner with the natural world, "a world in which a person acts in a given and bounded space which limits his freedom of action. Nature confines his steps, with time representing one of the chains which confine him." In other words, man, as an extension of the natural order, can do little, if anything, to transcend his physical limitations.

But when we relate time to the Exodus, we introduce a completely different order of existence. In this frame of reference, man is no longer chained and bounded. He becomes an active and creative agent capable of determining his own progress and future. He is "not swept through life's currents against his will; rather, he can direct, navigate and lead his own way." Put differently, when Nissan is our lodestar, miracles (NISIM) can happen. Man can leap above the order of time and space, defy his mortality and accomplish the impossible. How else can one explain the astonishing and lasting endurance of the Jewish People over the millennia? Indeed, the moment we hitched our destiny to the Divine Chariot, we became an eternal People.

The Exodus, then, was much more than

a central event in our history. It defined our very essence as a Chosen People. It empowered us with boundless possibilities and limitless ambitions. It promised us we could reach for the stars and achieve more than we ever could have imagined. And most of all, the Exodus reminds us that we are G-d's People with all its attendant glory and sacred responsibility.

Our Ethical Nature

"Ordinary People, even weak people, can do extraordinary things through temporary courage generated by a situation. But the person of character does not need the situation to generate his courage. It is part of his being and a standard approach to all his life's challenges... Character is not a fancy coat we put on for show; it's who we really are." - Michael Josephson

I was reminded of this quote while reviewing Rav Soloveitchik's memorable distinction between a M'RACHEIM and a RACHAMAN. Both words speak to the virtue of compassion. However, the Hebrew grammatical difference bifurcates this attribute into two very different characterizations. A M'RACHEIM is one who performs charitable acts. A combination of circumstances will challenge him to deliberate whether or not to respond compassionately. If he decides to perform the noble deed, we regard him as worthy, but not necessarily a compassionate person. "He may have

the capacity and inclination to love his fellow man, but he feels no dominant compulsion to act."

Not so the RACHAMAN. "Such a person has only one choice - to act compassionately. His attitude flows naturally from his personality. He does not hesitate; he cannot act otherwise." His love for his fellow is, as it were, built into his very DNA.

The Talmud tells us (Bava Metzia 59b) that the Torah exhorts us - in 36 verses - to treat the stranger kindly. Why? Because we were slaves in Egypt. The Egyptian bondage implanted within us these attributes of kindness and mercy (Mechilta). "The Egyptian experience sought to transform the Jews into a people to whom compassion would be a necessity, not merely an inclination."

Through our suffering in Egypt, our singular ethical culture was forged and the dross of moral impurities was removed. A new character was fashioned; our ethical sensitivity was refined. Compassion and kindness became indigenous to our very nature.

No wonder the references to our exile in Egypt are everywhere to be found in our Scriptures. Michael Josephson was, of course, right on the mark. Our lives must be less about the capricious mood and more about building character - a set of virtues that will enable us to be a walking Kiddush HaShem always.