



# MISHNAS CHAYIM

# משנת חיים

## MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

### Parshas Va'eira 5771 פרשת וארא תשע"א

#### LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

##### WHERE HAVE ALL THE DYBBUKS GONE?

In contemplating the role played by Pharaoh's magicians in this week's *parshah*, R' Ya'akov Kaminetsky (*Emes L'Ya'akov*, p. 263) reflected on the stark disparity between the reality of our world and the numerous wondrous elements that seemed to have existed only in the past. Although prohibited by the Torah, there were individuals of various nations who were skilled in the art of sorcery, which entailed some type of harnessing and manipulation of the *kochos hatumah* (forces of spiritual impurity). The Gemara is replete with accounts of real-life encounters with those beings known as *sheidim* (demons). And many are familiar with the phenomenon of the *dybbukim*, disembodied souls who were deemed to be so wicked and contaminated that they were even denied access to the purgatorial services of Gehinom. Instead, they are pursued mercilessly from place to place by angelic oppressors. The only place of refuge and relief for these wretched souls is inside the body of a living person, and so, from time to time, they would enter and "possess" some unfortunate victim, causing their unwitting "host" untold suffering in the process. There are numerous accounts from reliable sources about these occurrences, some from relatively recent times. Perhaps the best known "case" happened in the last century in the time of the Chofetz Chaim and was "attended to" by his disciple, R' Elchonon Wasserman. Yet, concerning that particular encounter, R' Elchonon himself wrote that it would most probably be the final such episode.

R' Ya'akov wondered: why is it that these brushes with the supernatural are relegated only to the past? Why must they remain concealed from this generation? The

key may lie in a fundamental principle emerging from this week's *parshah*.

When relating what lay in store for Pharaoh for his mistreatment of the Jews, Hashem informed Moshe: "I will harden Pharaoh's heart" (*Shemos* 7:3). This gives rise to a central issue: why, indeed, is Pharaoh to blame for his recalcitrance, if Hashem Himself supplied his stubbornness? *Bechirah chofshis* – free choice – is one of the most basic Torah concepts. There is a right choice and a wrong choice, but an individual is given free reign to make that proper choice and consequently can be held accountable. How could Pharaoh be held responsible if he was deprived of his *bechirah chofshis*?

According to the S'forno, however, that is exactly the point. The reason Hashem hardened Pharaoh's heart was precisely to *preserve* his ability to choose. Hashem desires repentance – even from the wicked. However, faced with the awesome power of the plagues, Pharaoh wasn't really being given a choice; anyone with even a scintilla of sanity would prefer to relinquish his slaves than be bombarded by an army of slimy amphibians invading their body cavities and croaking away. Fulfilling Hashem's command in response to such tortuous stimuli could hardly be characterized as an act of sincere contrition. In order to preserve at least a minimum of "challenge" – in other words, to maintain the balance of free will – Hashem felt it necessary to toughen Pharaoh's skin and harden his heart. This way, he wouldn't be "coerced" into doing the right thing.

R' Ya'akov explained the current absence of the aforementioned phenomena in a similar vein. Due to the existence of such institutions as the Beis

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Hamikdash and prophecy, and the proliferation of extremely holy personages, the Presence of Hashem was more clearly “visible.” It was therefore necessary to effect a “counterbalance” to even out the score. “G-d created one against the other” (*Koheles 7:14*). What challenge to believe in and observe the *mitzvos* could there be for people who witnessed miracles on an almost daily basis and received communications from Heavenly Voices? To an extent, free will was compromised.

And so Hashem “empowered” the darker forces, creating a diversion of sorts for the people of that period. In this way, a sense of choice was restored, as one could follow the Torah or allow himself to be drawn after demons and sorcerers.

Nowadays, however, we sadly lack so many of these spiritual “amenities.” On the contrary, anyone remotely familiar with what goes on in the world today can attest that there has been an astronomic moral and spiritual decline. Such a spiritually-unfriendly atmosphere itself poses enough of a challenge to

mitzvah observance. And so, R’ Ya’akov concludes, there is no longer a need to provide a counterbalance by strengthening the hand of the *kochos hatumah*, which is the source for such entities as sorcery, *sheidim*, and *dybbuks*.

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There is a flip-side to this idea as well. Until this point, we have seen that – in the absence of any challenge – Hashem will intervene in the interests of restoring free will. When deemed necessary, however, Hashem may take the opposite approach; that is, He may remove obstacles to observance when He perceives that the subject is not up to the challenge.

Perhaps the most familiar example of this idea is the law of the *yefas to’ar*, wherein the Torah outlines the circumstances and procedure by which a Jewish soldier can take a captive gentile maiden. As Rashi explains (*Devarim 21:11*), a person would be unable to restrain himself in the midst of the heat and height of battle, even had the Torah prohibited this action. To avoid automatic violation, the Torah rendered it permissible.

Another interesting manifestation of this concept is found in the Mishnah in Pesachim (4:9):

שְׁשֵׁה דְּבָרִים עָשָׂה חִזְקִיָּה הַמֶּלֶךְ. עַל שְׁלֹשָׁה הוֹדִו לוֹ... גָּנוּ סֶפֶר רַפּוּאוֹת.

“King Chizkiyah took six initiatives; (the Sages) agreed to three of them... (One of the actions which garnered their approval was that) he concealed the Book of Cures.”

This was a wondrous tome that outlined effective cures for ailments. The downside to this arrangement, explains the Bartenura, was that people no longer acted contritely by looking to Hashem. After all, why should they, if an automatic cure was right at hand? Seeing that the existence of this panacea was preventing people’s subservience to the Creator, Chizkiyah felt it should be removed; and the Sages deemed that his action bore Heaven’s approval.

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