



BETTER THAN ANY SEGULAH

WHY PHARAOH GOT THE *MAKKOS*

In this week's *parshah*, we encounter Moshe Rabbeinu being sent to Pharaoh. Hashem reveals to him: "I want you to know, Moshe, *וואס איז געווען און איר זענט און איר זענט און איר זענט*, I hardened the heart of Pharaoh and his servants. You're going to go and warn them to let the Yidden out of Mitzrayim. But I hardened their hearts and they will not be able to give in and agree" (Shemos 10:1). Why did Hashem do that? The *passuk* says, *למען שיתי אותותי אלה בקרבו*, "so that I can put My wonders on Pharaoh and his servants." I want to bring about wondrous revelations of the power of Hashem.

It is clear from this *passuk* that the *makkos* came onto Pharaoh because he didn't agree to send out the Yidden from Mitzrayim. If Hashem would not have hardened Pharaoh's heart, and Pharaoh would have sent the Yidden out right away, he would not have gotten the *makkos*. Let's say Pharaoh would have said at some point, "Hashem, I give up. Take the Jews. Go." Do you know what would have happened? The *makkos* would have stopped right there. Like it says: *כי אם מאן אתה לשלח את עמי*, "if you refuse to send out My people, בגבלך, I will send *makkas arbeh*." But if you send them out, you won't get *arbeh*. And the *passuk* says that by other *makkos* as well.

So, my Rebbi tz"l (Rav Meir Halevi Soloveichik) asked the following: Even if the Mitzriyim would have sent out the Yidden, they would still have needed to get the *makkos*. You know why? Because they subjugated, enslaved, oppressed, and tortured the Jews. And Hashem told Avraham Avinu at the *bris bein habesarim* *ועבדו את הגוי אשר יעבדו*, and the nation that will enslave the Jewish people, *דן אני*, I will judge them. Rashi says, how? With ten *makkos*. I'll bring *makkos* upon them. The *makkos* were a punishment for Egyptians having enslaved the Jews. The Mishnah in *Ediyos* (2:10) implies the same. It says: *משפט המצרים*, the judgment of the Egyptians was to be punished for twelve months, and those were the twelve months of the *makkos* that Mitzrayim suffered. That was the fulfillment of the promise of Hashem which said, *ועבדו את הגוי אשר יעבדו דן אני*. So the question is, why does the Torah say over here that the *makkos* came as a result of Pharaoh hardening his heart and for his refusal to send out the Jewish people?

HOW HE COULD HAVE SAVED HIMSELF

The Rebbi answered that there's no contradiction. Even though it was *nigzar*, it was decreed upon the Egyptians that they would have twelve months of judgment, had they done *teshuvah*, they would have been saved. *Teshuvah* helps for everything. You hear that?

Amazing! There is a covenant. Hashem tells Avraham at *bris bein habesarim* that the Mitzriyim are going to get punished. They're going to get ten *makkos*. And still in all, if there's the *gezeirah* will become *batel*, or at least be lightened, if they do *teshuva*. This is what it says in *Pirkei Avos* (4:11) *תשובה ומעשים טובים כתרסיס בפני הפורענות*. You hear that? It says *teshuvah* and *ma'asim tovim* are a shield that protects you from punishments you were supposed to get. Like we find by *anshei Ninveh*. They were *reshaim* and there was a terrible *gezeirah* upon them. They did *teshuvah* and the result was that Hashem removed the *gzar din* from them even though it was already decreed. So, even though Hashem already said to Avraham *ועבדו את הגוי אשר יעבדו דן אני*, *teshuvah* would have been *mevatel* that.

IT'S ALL IN OUR HANDS

Rabbosai, we have to internalize this. *Teshuvah*, *tefilah utzedakah ma'avirim es roah hagezeirah*. We often take this promise lightly. If somebody feels there's a *gzar din* against them, they have to realize they can do something about it.

Let's say, there's an *ayin hara*. That is also a *gzar din*. What do we do? There are many people who turn to what's called in Yiddish, *geesen bloi*. They spill lead, they melt lead, and they make a whole process out of it. I once got involved in it to see how they do it and whether there's anything to it. I never heard about it from my grandfather. I never heard about it from my *rebbe'im*. I never heard about it from anyone in my circles. The guy was trying to sell it to me. I told him, "Let's say you could show me that I have *ayin haras* on me, how are you going to remove them?" He said, "We have a magic trick that we do." "So let me think," I said. "On Rosh Hashanah, I know we say *תשובה תפילה וצדקה מעבירין את רוע הגזרה*. How come they didn't put *geesen bloi* in there? You have a *segulah*. You don't have to do *teshuvah*." Anyway, he said, "Do you want to do it?" I said, "How much is the cost?" I told the guy, "I'll make you a deal. You do it. You tell me my *ayin haras* and get rid of them, and I'll double what you're asking for. You can be sure I'm going to pay you, because if I don't pay you, you'll put the whammies all back on me." This is nonsense. It's a gimmick-taking advantage of poor people instead of telling them to do *teshuvah*.

When I was a *bachur*, I came across a *sefer*, one of these kabbalah *sefarim* that I was able to understand, and it discussed hand reading at length (palmistry, reading the lines on your hand). I was very intrigued by the *sefer*. I went and I asked my

Rebbi if there's any validity to such a thing. He said that most of the people who practice this are worthless. But there's one fellow about whom they said that he had a *mesorah* in this. He had a *kabbalah* in this, and *groise* Rebbes would go to him on Rosh Chodesh to see where they're holding and do *teshuvah* on their sins.

I decided I'm going to go. I took a roommate of mine who was going through some *tzaros*. He'd gotten into some legal trouble. Back in the day, there was a gimmick: there were people who used to come around to the *yeshivos*, looking for American boys. They'd say, "Could you rent us your passport for six weeks, and we'll give you two grand." This was in the 70s. For a *bachur* to have two grand in cash back then was like the sweepstakes. My roommate did it. He said to me, "Why don't you do it?" I said, "I guess I'm not as greedy as you are. Something tells me to keep away from it." Not that I was adverse to taking risks, and not that I wouldn't have loved a quick two grand. My parents gave me a very minimal allowance, extremely minimal. In any case, I didn't do it. *Nebach*, the *bachurim* who did it, got arrested. I told him, "Come, let's go to the palm reader. Let's see what he says." I took him to the palm reader.

I could see within fifteen minutes that he was an *erliche Yid* because he wasn't telling the *bachur* anything he wanted to hear. This guy wanted to hear about his future. The Yid was able to tell that the *bachur* was facing challenges. He didn't know the details, but he knew he was facing challenges. And he told him: Do *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*. The only bit of information he told him after a while was, "*Daven* very hard that you don't meet your first *zivug*. *Daven* that you should meet your second *zivug*. Start *davening* now." It was the only time I heard anything about the future from him. He said, "Why?" "Because your first *zivug* is going to die young. If you *daven* hard, you could avoid it and go straight to the second *zivug*."

I got to know this Yid a little bit. I had a brother who became very close to him. He told me a couple of tricks. But all the tricks were basically just to give you a heads up and what you should *daven* strong for, what you should do *teshuvah* strong for, and what you should give *tzedakah* for. He didn't charge a lot of money. He charged a minimal fee.

We all face *gezeiros*. We look for all kinds of *segulos*. But remember the shield that the Torah offers us. Remember *teshuvah*, *tefilah*, and *tzedakah*. Sometimes you can do both *tefilah* and *tzedakah* together. If you have somebody who's a *tzaddik* that's going to *daven* for you, and he's a poor *tzaddik*, so you get double. But your own *tefilah* is also good.

PHARAOH COULDN'T DO TESHUVAH

Now, the *tevah* of a person is that when he gets hit and beaten up, he becomes humbled. Naturally, Pharaoh and his people should have become humbled. It makes no sense how even a monster like Pharaoh would not give in, and instead, allow himself to be subjugated to total, utter destruction and desolation. It doesn't make any sense. But he had no choice; Hashem took that ability away from him. If he would have given in right away when he was able to, he would have saved himself a lot of *onshim*. Even though he said, "I thought I'm going to get punished no matter what." It's not true. If he would have done *teshuvah*, he would have been saved. Hashem tells Moshe Rabbeinu, "I hardened his heart. He can't do *teshuvah*. He can't send Bnei Yisrael out." And *azoy shteit* in the Rambam, in *perek vav* in *Hilchos Teshuvah* that such a thing works.¹

ALMOST HERE TODAY, GONE TOMORROW

I have to tell you that I've seen people do *teshuvah* and get spared.

There's a *ma'aseh* we haven't said over in a while. One Erev Shabbos, in the afternoon, I received a phone call from a *talmid* of mine. He said, "Could you please go to the hospital? My mother is dying, and I'd like you to be present and do whatever you've got to do before. Could you go?" I said, "For you, I'm going to go." I jumped into my car and drove down to the hospital. It wasn't that far.

I come to the room. I see three doctors standing in the hall near the doorway, in their white coats. One of them said, "Excuse me, may I ask which patient you are here for?" I told them the patient's name. I said, "How does it look?" He said, "Tops an hour and a half." I inquired what type of doctors they were. One guy was a neurologist, one guy was a nephrologist, the other guy was a cardiologist. They said that everything was shutting down and the patient was already on the way out.

I went into the room and saw an elderly woman, 81 years old, to be exact, lying on the bed, on her back, her hands by her sides. It didn't look like there was any life. She looked like she was in some kind of coma, or semi-coma. I didn't exactly expect her to be jumping around, but she was just lying there. No machines were attached to her at that point. Most of the time, when you go to people in the hospital, especially people who have been there for a while, they're attached to a lot of wires. They had pulled everything out from her already, and I stood next to her bed, and the family had not come yet. I beat the family to the hospital. I riffled around the drawers next to her bed to find a *siddur*. And I found one. The son had already brought a *siddur*. I opened the *siddur* to *Krias Shema Al Hamitah*. Then I went like this (coughing, clearing the throat). I wanted to see if I would get a response. And her eyes looked open. They looked like dead eyes looking straight at me. I said, "Hello, Mrs. So and So."

¹ ואפשר שיחטא אדם חטא גדול או חטאים רבים עד שייתן הדין לפני דין האמת שיהא הפרעון מזה החוטא על חטאים אלו שעשה ברצונו ומדעתו שמונעין ממנו התשובה ואין מניחין לו רשות לשוב מרשעו כדי שימות ויאבד בחטאו שעשה. הוא שהקדוש ברוך הוא אמר על ידי ישעיהו (ישעיהו ו') "השמן לב העם הזה" וגו'. וכן הוא אומר (דה"ב לו טז) "ויהיו מלעבים במלאכי האלהים ובוזים דבריו ומתענתים בנבאיו עד עלות חמת ה' בעמו עד לאין מרפא". כלומר חטאו ברצונם והרבו לפשע עד שנתחייבו למנוע מהן התשובה שהיא המרפא. לפיכך כתוב בתורה (שמות ד כא) "ואני (אחזק) אקשה את לב פרעה". לפי שחטא מעצמו תחלה והרע לישראל הגרים בארצו שנאמר (שמות א') "הבה נתחמקה לו". נתן הדין למנוע התשובה ממנו עד שנפרע ממנו. לפיכך חזק הקדוש ברוך הוא את לבו. ולמה היה שולח לו ביד משה ואומר שלח ועשה תשובה וכבר אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא אין אתה משלח שנאמר (שמות ט ל) "ואתה ועבדיך ידעתי" וגו' (שמות ט טז) "ואולם בעבור זאת העמדתיך". כדי להודיע לבאי העולם שבזמן שמונע הקדוש ברוך הוא התשובה לחוטא אינו יכול לשוב אלא ימות ברשעו שעשה בתחלה ברצונו. וכן סיחון לפי עונות שהיו לו נתחייב למנוע מן התשובה שנאמר (דברים ב ל) "כי הקשה ה' אליהיך את רוחו ואמץ את לבבו". וכן הפנענים לפי תועבותיהן מנע מהן התשובה עד שעשו מלחמה עם ישראל. שנאמר (יהושע א כ) "כי מאת ה' היתה לחזק את לבם לקראת המלחמה עם ישראל למען הקרימם". וכן ישראל בימי אליהו לפי שהרבו לפשע מנע מאותן המרבים לפשע תשובה שנאמר (מלכים א יח לז) "ואתה הסבת את לבם אחריתי" כלומר מנעת מהן התשובה. נמצאת אומר שלא גזר האל על פרעה להרע לישראל. ולא על סיחון לחטא בארצו. ולא על הפנענים להתעיב. ולא על ישראל לעבד עבודה זרה. אלא גזר חטאו מעצמן וכלן נתחייבו למנוע מהן התשובה (משנה תורה, הלכות תשובה ו:ג)

She acknowledged me, and I said, "I understand you've been sleeping a lot lately. Did you say the *Shema* before you went to sleep? I'll assume that's a no." I said, "Let's say the *Shema*. And before the *Shema*," I said, "the custom is you say, 'I'm *mochel* everybody.' You ask for forgiveness, and you say you forgive everybody." I read it for her. She acknowledged what I was doing. I said the *Shema*, and I put the *siddur* away.

By that time, the family came in and was standing around the bed. I waited another few minutes. I wasn't sure what was supposed to happen. I mean, I was assuming there was going to be a *yetzias neshamah*. There are certain things you say, *Tehillim*, and things that you say before and as the *neshamah* is departing. But I decided that I'm going to try something else first. I did my throat clearing again. She opened her eyes, and I said, "Do you want to make a deal?" Again, deadpan eyes. I said, "A deal. Do you want to make a deal?" She mouthed the words, "With who?" I didn't hear her voice, but I could see from her lips. I said, "Not with me, with Hashem." She said, "What?" I said, "I want you to accept upon yourself to subjugate your will to the will of Hashem. Be *machnia* yourself, humble yourself. Give yourself over to the will of Hashem." She said, "What?" I said, "It's not relevant right now, what. At the right time, we'll discuss what specific things I'm referring to." This was not a *frum* woman. She grew up in a *frum* home. Her son was very *frum*. She was now living in her son's home, in an attached apartment. She closed her eyes for a few minutes. She opened them back up, and she said, "Okay, I accept." Then she fell back into her sleep.

Meanwhile, we're all standing there, and the nurses for the afternoon shift came in. They saw me standing there with a hat and a beard. They saw the son standing there. He also had a hat on. And the nurse said to us, "Oh, this patient is religious?" I said, "I guess." The nurse says to me, "How religious is she?" I remember thinking, "What am I supposed to say?" That much? This much? What am I supposed to say? I didn't have words to say. I said to her, "What difference does it make now?" Six inches, a foot? She said, "No, because different people have different customs. Some people will move the bed. Some people won't move the bed. Some people will tear tissues. Some people won't tear tissues. Some people call the nurse. Some people won't call the nurse." I said, "Oh, I get it." I said, "I'm not sure." And all of a sudden, from the bed, the patient said, "Now, very." That's what she said. I'm very religious now. I was shocked. She was a very tough lady, tough as nails.

Anyway, I said to the patient, "Do you like salmon?" She hadn't eaten in three days. I said, "Would you like some chicken soup? I'm going to go home now, Mrs. So and So." Her eyes weren't even open. "I'm going to go home and I'm going to get you some salmon and some chicken soup, and I'm going to send it to the hospital." Meanwhile, before I stepped out, the nurse came running back because I had asked her to bring the Shabbos box. The Shabbos box comes with electric candles, *gefilte fish*, matzah, and grape juice. She calls me out and she says, "There's no purpose for this." I said, "Why?" "This lady has not more than forty minutes left to live, tops." I said, "Who told you?" I said, "Do you mind humoring me? Just humor me. Bring me the box." She said, "Sure. If you want the box, I'll give you the box." So she brought the box. I set the stuff up and then I left.

Her son walked me to the elevator. He said to me, "What are you going to ask my mother to do?" I said, "To cover her hair." He said, "What??" I said, "To cover her hair. I figured, she's 81 years old. I'm sure you noticed that her hair is not exactly anything to look at." I was thinking the closest thing it could be an advertisement for is snow on somebody's head in the middle of the summer. "There's nothing there," I said, "Listen, it's a small thing, but it's a big thing." And I went home.

I came home, and I sent my daughter to bring over some fish and soup. I went to *shul*. I told my daughter, "Just drop this off. Give it to her, tell her good Shabbos, and run back home." My daughter ran to the hospital. During the meal, during my *tov lehodot laHashem*, I asked my daughter, "Oh, by the way, what happened?" She said, "What happened? Well, when I brought the food, she asked me for her glasses. I gave them to her. She sat up and wanted to see the food. She wanted to look at it." I said, "Are you serious? Are you sure you went to the right bed? The first bed in the room?" "Yeah. She said, 'Mmm, this looks good.'" I said, "I think you got the wrong bed, or you got the wrong room, or something." I said, "At least somebody is enjoying the soup and the fish."

On Motzei Shabbos, I called right away, and they told me she's 100% better. On Monday, she was discharged from the hospital. The doctor had told me that she's never seeing the light of day again, but Hashem decided that she's going to see the light of day.

The following Shabbos, they're sitting by the Shabbos table, and they're talking about the past week. The lady says, "Do you realize that I was dead last week? I came back from the grave. All because Rabbi Brog made a deal." She says to her son, "I wonder what he's going to ask me." "Mom, what do you think he'll say?" "Ah, you know these rabbis. Probably *tzedakah*." He said, "No, he doesn't want *tzedakah*." "What does he want?" "Something easier." "What is that?" "He wants you to cover your hair." She said, "What??" She said, "Is he crazy??" He said, "Ma, I mean it's not exactly going to damage the way you look." She said, "The only thing I have left is my hair. You want me to cover that up??" He said, "Ma, I don't think you're in the position to bargain. You just came back from the other side. You're not going to cover your hair?" "No!" She stood up from the Shabbos table, pushed her chair back, went to her room, slammed the door shut, and she went to sleep. This was the Shabbos morning meal. After Minchah, the son goes and knocks on his mother's door. No answer. He opens the door. The mother is hovering between heaven and earth. He calls the ambulance. They rush into the house and take her back to the hospital.

That night, he called me up. He was crying. "Rebbi, I'm telling you, it's terrible." I said, "Listen, we had a deal. You can't break deals. You've got to keep the deals." "Rebbi, do you have another idea for me?" I said, "Listen, I wish I did." "Will you come visit her?" I said, "Sometime, I'll come. It's not the best thing for me to come. I don't want to make a *kitrug* on her." I decided to keep away, but at some point during that week, he asked me again, "Please come." So I went. Every orifice of hers had tubes

coming out. Her hands, her neck, her chest. There were *mamash* wires all over. She looked more like a robot than a human being. On her face, she had these two huge ventilation devices to supply air for her, and they made all kinds of noises.

I'm watching and I said, "Boy, does this look bad. This looks bad." One of her sons goes to her, "Ma, Rabbi Brog is here." She opens her eyes, she sees a ghost, and she says, "Why can't I give *tzedakah*?" I said, "Who said anything about *tzedakah*?" "I'll give *tzedakah*." I said, "Hashem doesn't need your charity. Hashem has got plenty of charity." "What do you want me to do?" "Something very small. Just cover your hair. It is not that hard." She was a sharp lady. She tells me, "All the *rebbetzins* in Cleveland didn't cover their hair back in the day. Why do I have to cover my hair?" I said, "Very good point. Very good point. But you've got to take note of one thing," I said. "All those *rebbetzins* who didn't cover their hair are not around anymore. All the new *rebbetzins* all cover their hair. Which group do you want to belong to? Make your choice." She said, "Who said this is the law?" I said, "Hashem." "Where does it say it?" I said, "Are you familiar with what the *pesukim* say? It's a *passuk*. It's brought in in the *halachah*, the Chafetz Chaim writes about it in *Mishnah Berurah*. There is a *din deOreisa* that you've got to cover your hair and that's all. It's been the *minhag* for who knows how many years. It's what we do." She started getting very upset, but her hands were tied down because they were afraid she was going to pull out her pipes. I said, "I didn't come here to agitate you or to get you worked up. I came here to assist. I'm wishing you well. You should have a *refuah sheleimah*." And I walked out.

Her son followed me to the elevator. He said, "It's *mamash* crazy. Is there any hope?" I said, "I'm trying my best. What should I do? Punch her in the nose? I'm trying my best, but I don't think it's doing anything over here." But I told him, "I'm going to give you advice. Go get a snood from your wife." His wife covered her hair. I said, "Get one of those snoods and keep it in a bag. So, in case she comes around, you'll have one ready."

The rest of the week goes by. At the end of the week, I don't remember if it was Thursday or Friday, they put her in the ICU. Her situation was getting very complicated. The last time I was there, I met the doctor. It was funny. The doctor said, "Rabbi, this time she's definitely not getting out." I said, "Doctor, you're a stubborn man. If I were you, I would never say never." I said, "Doc, I've seen a lot of interesting things in my life. You never know." He said, "This time she's never getting out. Even if she gets out, it's going to be a nursing home because her lungs are so weak. It's not happening." I said, "Okay."

Anyway, Friday night, she was in the ICU. Her son was there with her. In the middle of the night, she opens up her eyes. She hasn't talked in days, and she says, "Is this Rabbi Brog's law?" He said, "No, it's a Torah law." "What if I wanted to do it because Rabbi Brog said so, will that work?" "Rabbi Brog told me to tell you you can't do it because Rabbi Brog said so. You could only do it because you're giving in to the will of Hashem. It's Hashem's will." She said, "How would I do it even if I wanted to?" He says, "I happen to have a bag here and I've got an extra snood for you." She said, "Really?" "Yeah, from my wife, it's here." She puts the snood on her head. She grabs ahold of it with her hand to keep it on her head. She goes back into a coma. He calls me on Motzei Shabbos. She was still in the coma. He said to me, "Rebbi, do you think there is any hope?" I said, "There is always hope. But she's a winner even if she passes on, because she was *mekabel ol malchus Shamayim*. She was *mekabel* the will of Hashem. She subjugated herself to the will of Hashem, so she's a winner. Could she come out and be a regular person? That's going to take something heavy. I can't tell you that." "Give me a *havtachah*." I said, "I can't give you a *havtachah*. I don't know. The situation is pretty bleak, but we won."

Anyway, to make a long story a drop shorter, this lady was taken out of the hospital, put into a nursing home for many months, and eventually she was discharged from the nursing home in a much healthier situation than she was before she went into the hospital the first time. I went to visit her. She told me, "I'm a very stubborn woman, but I saw the light. If you ever meet somebody like me again, send them to me. I'll straighten them out." I said, "You've got to subjugate yourself to the will of Hashem, and if a person does that, they'll be okay." That lady was toast. She was gone. She already had both feet on the banana peels. It was over. It wasn't a *safek*. It wasn't a *sfeik sfeika*. And she was saved, not once, but twice. And, rabbosai, she lived for another three years. She was 81 when I met her during that first episode. She passed away at the age of 84. She did some serious living, and she had a quality life - she wasn't on machines. If you're *machnia* yourself, you'll be okay. I thought it may have been too late for her to be *machnia* herself. But no, it's never too late. תשב אנוש על דכא. If Pharaoh would have been smarter and Pharaoh would have given in, he wouldn't have had to suffer the *makkos*. But then — he wouldn't have been Pharaoh.

IN CONCLUSION

Why did Pharaoh and the Mitzriyim suffer the *makkos*? It is evident from the *pesukim* that even though it was *nigzar* for him to suffer for enslaving Am Yisrael, had he done *teshuvah* when he was still able to, he would have been spared. When we face challenges in life, we search for solutions. We might even try *segulos*. But we learn from this that better than any *segulah* is to fix ourselves up with *teshuvah*, *tefillah*, and *tzedakah*. *Teshuvah* means to accept the will of Hashem in the area that each one of us is challenged with. This week, I will (*bli neder*) think about how I can be *mekabel* the will of Hashem and do *teshuvah*, or, I will do *chazarah* on *hilchos teshuvah*.

