

Parshas Bo
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SHMUZ #136— I'm Never Wrong

After a “natural” disaster, people speak with much greater reverence. Even normally arrogant people, after living through a hurricane, tidal wave, or earthquake, have a very real sense of humility. Their reality has been changed, and they view life differently. Yet, when Pharaoh and Mitzraim experienced the makkos, that wasn’t their reaction.

The Egyptians lived through the most powerful manifestation of HASHEM’s might ever shown to man. For months, they were afflicted while HASHEM “played with Mitzraim.” Two powerful points were made clear: HASHEM is the Master of Creation, and Moshe was the messenger of HASHEM. Everything that he said would happen, happened — with precision and exactness.

Now, HASHEM told Moshe that the final, and most potent Makkah, would come. “Tell Pharaoh that exactly at midnight, every first born in Mitzraim will die.”

Yet when Moshe approached Pharaoh, he changed the message; he said that “approximately” at midnight the firstborn will die.

Rashi is bothered by this. Why did Moshe change the words that HASHEM used? He answers that Moshe was afraid that Pharaoh’s astrologers would make a grave error. They would be watching the clock to see if Moshe was accurate. Even though the firstborns would die exactly at the stroke of midnight, the astrologers might have the wrong time and mistakenly assume that it wasn’t midnight.

They would then accuse Moshe of being a liar. To prevent this from happening, Moshe said, “approximately at midnight.”

HOW DID THEY TELL TIME IN THE ANCIENT WORLD? | This Rashi is very difficult to understand when we take into account the historical reality.

Today, we live with a great awareness of time. We have clocks all around us — in every room and in every car, on pens, microwaves, computers and cell phones. We can’t buy groceries or go to the bank without a date and time stamp adorning our receipts. We are constantly reminded of our point in time. And our chronometers are precise, down to the nanosecond. For under a hundred dollars, you can purchase a radio-synchronized, atomic clock that guarantees to be accurate to within a second every two thousand years! In short, we have good reason to assume that our sense of timekeeping is accurate.

HOW ACCURATE WERE THE TIME PIECES IN ANCIENT EGYPT? | However, this wasn’t the way the ancient world kept time. During the day, they used a sundial, which might have been somewhat close to almost accurate — sort of. At night, the only way to tell time was by gazing at the stars. Without out aid of computers and optics, measuring objects light years away was a highly inaccurate science.

The last makkah was to begin at night. Even if the Egyptians prided themselves on ingenuity and advancements, they had to know that they were mostly likely wrong when it came to accurately knowing when midnight was. If so, why would the Mitzrim assume that they were right and Moshe was wrong? If everything he had said up until then had been true, and they didn’t have a reliable way to know what time it was, why should they assume they were right and he was wrong?

ANSWER: WE HUMANS DON’T LIKE TO BE WRONG | The answer to this question is based on a quirk in human nature: we assume that we are

I’M NEVER WRONG

שמות פרק יא (ד) ויאמר משה כה אמר יְדִןְךָ פְּחַצַּת הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם: רַשִׁי פֶּרֶק יֵא פְסוּק ד' ור"ד כמו כחצות הלילה ואמרו שאמר משה כחצות דמשמע סמוך לו או לפניו או לאחריו ולא אמר בחצות שמה יטעו אצטגניני פרעה ויאמרו משה בדאי הוא אבל הקב"ה יודע עתיו ורגעיו אמר בחצות.

right, and we don’t like to hear otherwise. The ironic part of this is that we assume we are right whether we are justified or not. We assume we are right whether we have really thought out our position or not. We assume we are right whether we really have evidence to the facts or it just happens to be the first thing that came to mind. We assume that the starting position that we have is correct. It’s just a given. And it is very difficult to get us to change our minds.

Facts aren’t that influential. Reality isn’t that convincing. Once someone’s mind is made up, that is the way it is. We are heedless in the formation of our opinions, but once they are formed, we defend them as if our very lives depended upon it.

The root cause of this is arrogance. An arrogant person is not open to change. An arrogant person is not open to hearing that he isn’t right. And an arrogant person has great difficulty learning — because he already knows everything there is to know.

The Mitzrim are a fantastic illustration of this concept. Moshe was afraid that if there was a discrepancy between his time and theirs, they would assume they were right and he was wrong. Even though he had proven himself again and again, even though all the other details about the firstborn dying were completely correct, there wouldn’t have even been a question in their minds. If they determined it was precisely 11:45, fifteen minutes before the prescribed time, and the firstborns started dying, clearly Moshe was a liar. Because of this, Moshe used the expression *approximately* so that they shouldn’t come to this mistake.

How accurate were the time pieces in Ancient Egypt

THE APPLICATION TO OUR LIVES | This concept has great relevance to us on two levels. The first is when we set out to influence others. If I view things differently than another person and my goal is to move him over to my way of thinking, I have to be sensitive to the nature of changing another person’s opinion. I have to help him see things in a new light. The simple facts alone are not what will allow him to see things from my perspective. Often, it isn’t even the clarity with which I present my case. If his ego gets in the way, there will be no communication. Regardless of how correct I am, I will be speaking to deaf ears. For that reason, it is often imperative for me to allow other people to gracefully maintain their positions while gently moving them along, allowing them to presume this was the way they thought all along. Only then will I be able to convey to them a different approach.

The second area is in regards to myself. What happens when someone points out to me that I am wrong? What about when I know that they are correct? What about when I know that they are only saying it for my good? How open am I to hearing this? Am I able to deal with the concept that maybe I am wrong? Part of becoming a bigger person is the ability to be teachable, to be big enough to understand that not everything I thought of is right. And not everything that someone else says is automatically wrong just because it isn’t my way. Some of the most critical words for growth are: *Maybe I’m wrong. I have been wrong before. Let me see.*

When a person opens himself up to the idea that he may have erred, he becomes far more pleasant, far more agreeable, and is on the path to true growth.

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