

Lessons from the Chassidishe Parsha

The teachings of the Alter Rebbe in Torah Ohr and Likkutei Torah

From staff to snake and back to staff

ד"ה ויאמר ה' אל משה ואהרן לאמר בו'

פרשת וארא
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In the first miracle performed before Pharaoh, Hashem instructed Moshe to tell Aharon to cast down his staff to the ground and it would become a snake. After the Egyptians magicians did the same with their own staffs, the staff of Aharon reverted back to become a staff once more and swallowed the staffs of the Egyptian magicians.

As the first sign performed before Pharaoh, a fore-runner to the Ten Plagues that were still to come, this sign had a deeper message. What was the symbolism of the staff becoming a snake and then reverting back to the staff and how was this a sign for the Plagues that were still to come?

The Ten Plagues were not just to punish the Egyptians; this could have been done in one instant. The Plagues were certainly not for the Jewish people, who were "believers the sons of believers".

The Posuk says וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־אֲנִי ה', "And Mitzrayim will know that I am Hashem." The Plagues were about creating a realisation within the Egyptians, "that I am Hashem."

One of the concepts discussed in Kabbalah is the idea that hidden within the physicality of our world are G-dly sparks (Nitzotzos).

As part of the Divine process of bringing the worlds into existence, there was a phase, or world, of great G-dly lights. This was the world of Tohu. The light within this world was too intense to be contained within the limited vessels of this world, resulting in the "shattering of the vessels".

The fragments of these lights 'fell' and descended through further Tzimtzumim - concealments and contractions, until they became encloded and hidden within the existence of the lower created worlds. These hidden sparks are the inner life-force of the everything within our world.

In their source, prior to their collapse, these sparks of G-dly light were completely Battel—surrendered and nullified to the revelation of G-dliness that openly pervaded that reality.

Unlike the Bittul in their source, the created worlds perceive themselves as an independent existence; not recognising their inherent G-dly source and dependence. This is alluded to in the Novi who describes Pharaoh as a serpent who says "The Nile belongs to me and I created myself". This sense of self and independence is the dynamic of Kelipah.

Most of these sparks 'fell' into Mitzrayim. When the Jewish people left Egypt, the Torah says וַיִּנְצְלוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם, "they

emptied out Mitzrayim". On the literal level this refers to the physical spoils, but on a deeper level it refers to the hidden sparks that had been released through the plagues and could now be elevated when the Jewish people left.

(This is also the meaning of the promise to Avraham that after 400 years as strangers in a foreign land, they would leave with great wealth).

Kelipah, the term used in Kabbalah to describe the forces that oppose or conceal G-dliness, literally means a shell or peel. Like the shell which covers over a nut, the Kelipah covers over the G-dly spark inside of it, so that it cannot be revealed.

To access the fruit, one must break open the nut. וַיִּדְעוּ מִצְרַיִם כִּי־אֲנִי ה'. The word Veyadu also means to break or crush. This was the purpose of the Plagues - to break the Kelipah of Mitzrayim so that the sparks of G-dliness trapped within could be revealed and elevated.

This inner purpose of the Plagues was the meaning of the first sign. The word מטה - a staff, also means to draw down or incline; referring to a Hamshacha - a flow of G-dliness that comes from Above. The snake is icon of Kelipah.

The staff turning into a snake alluded to the hidden truth; that far from being independent, the existence of the Kelipos comes from the flow of G-dly light that descends to vivify them in their created form. Were this flow to cease, they would no longer exist.

The snake transforming back into a staff was to show that ultimately, through the revelation of G-dliness in the Plagues, the Kelipos would become elevated and once again Battel to and united with their source - the מטה.

Our sages teach us that in every generation we must reexperience the Redemption from Egypt. The Alter Rebbe says that this is a daily Avodah. Mitzrayim means limitations. These are the challenges that we face in the world, particularly those that make it difficult for us to serve Hashem.

The message of this Maamar is that we have to realise that the snake is really a staff. Hashem created everything and nothing has independent power or authority, no matter how daunting it may seem. We were created to serve Hashem and nothing can truly stand in our way. It is merely a challenge.

The challenge is for us to reveal how the snake is really a staff, so that we can transform it and elevate it; taking out the hidden spoils from Golus as we go to our own redemption.