

100 parashas

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This week's Perceptions and Connecting the Dots is lovingly dedicated in memory of my father and teacher, Moshe Leib Ben Dovid, z"l. May the learning of them be an illuy Nishamah for him.

Speak to the entire community of Israel, saying, "On the tenth of this month, let each one take a lamb for each parental home, a lamb for each household." (Shemos 12:3)

I WAS RECENTLY told a dvar Torah from Rabbi Moshe Shapiro, zt"l, about the redemption process. It explains why redemption is compared to the planting of a seed, a mysterious process in its own right. We know HOW it works, but not WHY it works that way.

Basically, this is what happens. A seed planted in the ground has a hard covering called a seed coat. As the

seed in the ground absorbs water it begins to swell, which ultimately splits the seed coat and then the embryonic plant inside begins to grow, all OUT OF EYESIGHT. Were a person to open the earth prematurely, they would arrest the process.

Eventually the plant extends its roots downward into the earth and unfolds the stem and leaf portion upwards towards the sky. When the plant breaks through the ground, you can still see the seed (and the baby leaves inside) on the little stem. The seed leaves provide food for the growing plant until the new leaves are big enough to do that on their own. Then the seed leaves shrivel up.

Exile and redemption work similarly. So much of what goes into a redemption begins in the exile stage, out of eyesight. Not just this, but so much of what is necessary for an upcoming redemption might look like just the opposite to us.

After all, is it called “exile” if you can understand the “bad” while you’re going through it, if you can see how it is for the good? It is still called “suffering” but is it called “exile”? What seems to make exile, exile, is the way the good it may lead to is hidden from our eyesight, making the suffering seem meaningless and therefore, more painful.

The Talmud says that three things come when we’re not paying attention: a scorpion, a lost object, and Moshiach (Sanhedrin 97a). The Maharal discusses the significance of these three, but based upon the previous idea, Moshiach is understandable even without the Maharal.

By definition, redemption is a process that only makes sense AFTER the fact. If we think we understand it BEFORE it happens, chances are we’re looking in the wrong place, or in the wrong way. More than likely, when

Moshiach comes, it will be from a direction we either overlooked or didn't even anticipate.

Perhaps this is why so many predictions made by people "in the know" did not pan out as planned. We'd like to believe that the predictions were correct, but we were just not ready for redemption to occur. It may be more that there were factors that were hidden from those making the predictions, affecting their outcome.

Maybe that is also why Ya'akov Avinu was denied the opportunity to tell his sons, the 12 Tribes, how redemption would unfold. It may not only be that they were not fully worthy to know such secret information in advance. It could have been that redemption, by definition, is the result of a mysterious process of exile. It's just the way it is when it comes to exile and redemption.

Thus we see Moshe Rabbeinu having a difficult time with the exile-to-redemption process as well. After demanding that Pharaoh release the Jewish people from bondage, and watching their slavery increase instead, Moshe complained bitterly to God. But, instead of empathizing with Moshe for such difficult circumstances, He reprimanded him instead, and denied Moshe the opportunity to later lead the Jewish people into Eretz Yisroel.

Thus another name for Seder Zerayim, the part of the Talmud that deals with the laws of agriculture, is "Sefer Emunah," the "Book of Faith." After planting the seed, the only thing left to add to make it grow is emunah—faith in God, for the rain, and for a sprout that grows healthily. All we can do is to stare at the ground and look for the signs that all is well as we anxiously wait for the fruits of labor—literally.

But once it DOES sprout, then there is what to get excited about. There are things WE can do to assist the

fledgling plant grow into a mature stalk. And there are preparations to be made so that when harvest time finally comes around, we are ready.

The same thing is true of redemption as well. Once it begins to “sprout,” as it did according to the Zohar in 5500, there is reason to get excited. The Vilna Gaon did, and instructed his students regarding what to do to make it flourish. Granted, it can still be a fair bit of time until the time for “harvesting” arrives, but there are plenty of things we CAN and SHOULD do to expedite the process.

That is because just waiting for a plant to grow can be risky. Just because a plant has managed to break through the ground and show itself to the world does not mean that it no longer requires nurturing. It usually does, and to not provide what it needs can end up allowing a crop to fail, even after it showed such promise.

The same thing is true about redemption. Obviously God can do whatever He wants in whatever way He wishes to do it. He chooses to allow us to play a role in the redemption process, and makes it occur in a way that we can. And to such an extent, that if we DON'T participate as we should, redemption can have extra glitches, or be postponed indefinitely.

This is why God has Moshe Rabbeinu tell the Jewish people about the Korban Pesach, and about putting the blood on the doorposts the night of the tenth plague. They may seem only like rituals to us, but they were part of nurturing the redemption through its final growth process, until the actual redemption occurred.

Not everyone at that time did what they should have. Consequently, only one-fifth of the Jewish population—only ONE-FIFTH—were able to reap the bounty of redemption when it finally came. The other FOUR-FIFTHS

died in the Plague of Darkness because, when it comes to a redemption that MUST occur and cannot be postponed, then it is the unworthy who are pushed off beforehand.

And as Rava said, “It will be likewise at the time the Final Redemption as well” (Sanhedrin 111a). Redemption has sprouted. It’s time to nurture it.

CTD#14: What Does God Say?

POLITICS. IT’S ALL about power. It’s about control. I am reminded of this once again as our local community hits the polls to choose a new mayor.

The last mayor died in office. He wasn’t well to begin with, but those who knew him well were certain that the politics did him in. He had a heart attack the same day he had faced down some less-than-friendly local pressure. Who can know for sure, since it’s pretty much decided by Heaven who dies, when, and how.

It’s a little different in the Charedi world than in other sectors of the population, though. In secular politics, God rarely enters the voting picture. In “frum” politics, He’s invoked all over the place. Either one side or the other, or both, work hard to give voters the impression that choosing the other guy is not only a bad decision, it is an even evil.

It could be, especially if one candidate is for Torah and the other one is against it. Or, if one wants to uphold time-honored Torah traditions and the other wants to revamp them. But, what happens if both candidates have Torah agendas? What then?

The truth is, the winner of the election was already decided back at the beginning of Creation. It was already

built in, as is the case with respect to every electoral victor. We may THINK it comes down to our vote, but it really doesn't. The person whom God has chosen to put into office will get in, for our good or bad, and the one who is not meant to get in, won't.

So, why go through the motions of acting as if our vote DOES make a difference? Because it DOES, but not to the winner or the loser, but to us, the voter. It is our opportunity to show who we are, what we believe, and how we act. It is the time that we reveal whose team we belong to, our own, or God's.

One of my favorite and most insightful stories is told by Rabbi Berel Wein. It is about his rebi, who was one of the first rabbis to lead the OU regarding kashrus issues. During one session, as the people around the table debated whether or not to give a hechsher to a particular company, they finally turned to his rebi for his decision.

As all eyes focused on the rabbi, he just answered in Yiddish: "Vas zucht Got—What does God say?" His point was simple. He was telling them that they could debate the issue as much as they wanted, but at the end of the day, the only opinion that mattered was God's.

It sounds obvious. Isn't that what the debate was all about, the halachic basis to either accept or reject the opportunity to give a hechsher to some food product? Isn't that what all sides are concerned about in a Torah community election, God's choice of mayor?

It would be easier if that was the case. Unfortunately, for many, it is not. They don't think in those terms very much, or at least enough. They believe in God and they follow His Torah, for the most part. But as far a relationship with God goes, it is rather weak, as if God is CEO of

some overseas company whose picture hangs on the wall, but that's about it. He's just too far away to connect to.

You see, it's the yetzer hara's ambition to personalize everything, to make us see things in terms of the small picture, which amounts to a lot of PERSONAL agendas. We may WANT to do the "right" thing, but when it comes down to decisions, the "right" way often becomes what's best for us INDIVIDUALLY, as opposed to what's best for the community GLOBALLY.

It is so easy to be selfish in life, and especially in today's world. It's such a big place, so much is going on, and so much imbalance seems to exist. The Torah was given to us to help us become selfless, to become more concerned about what God thinks than what we WANT Him to think, or WE say that He thinks.

Remember Yosef's brothers, and how they told God not to tell Ya'akov they had sold Yosef into slavery? They had believed with all of their hearts that they had been doing God's will when they did that. If you had asked them at that time, "What do you think God is saying right now?" they would have answered, "See your brother!"

Then they saw the consequences of their actions, and they became increasingly less sure if they had understood God's will correctly. When, 22 years later, Yosef revealed himself as the Viceroy of Egypt, they had to go back in time and rewrite the script. It turned out that God had really said, "DON'T see your brother!"

I started off talking about our local election, but that was just an excuse to make a broader point. We have to get used to thinking in "big picture" terms. We have to realize that our decisions in life reveal a lot more about us than we may think, and that they may have more long term effects than we had assumed. And, the starting

point is getting used to saying, “Okay, this is what I think about the situation, but what does GOD think about it? What does He want?”