



The oldest **FAKE NEWS** around

Showing half the picture and taking all the credit

BY ROBERT SUSSMAN



WHEN DID WE TRULY BECOME LIBERATED FROM our Egyptian slavery? In other words, was there a precise point in time – even a precise location that we can point to – when Hashem took us out from Egypt where we were truly emancipated once and for all?

In fact, the Torah tells us that there was such a moment where we gained our freedom, including a physical location where it took place: “Speak to the Children of Israel and have them turn back and encamp before *Pi HaChiros* [lit: The Mouth of Freedom], between *Migdol* [the name of a place] and the sea, facing *Ba’al Tzephon* [the last standing Egyptian idol].”¹ Rashi explains that this place had originally been called *Pisom* (lit: Enclosed Mouth) – one of the two Egyptian cities, the other named *Ramses*, built by Jewish slaves – but now it was called *Pi HaChiros* because the Children of Israel became free men there.

So why was it precisely in this place and at this point that we became free? What was so special about it and what exactly happened there?

A FATAL BLOCKAGE

The primary stumbling block for the Children of Israel in Egypt was *avodah zarah*, the worship of idols and other foreign, false gods. And, even after we left Egypt, this was the accusation made against us by the ministering angels² when we faced off against the Egyptian army at the Sea of Reeds. The ministering angels argued to Hashem, “These are idol worshipers and these are idol worshippers!” – in other words, how can You choose between them, Hashem, saving the one nation and destroying the other one?! It was when we reached the location of *Pi HaChiros*, when we were encamped in front of the last Egyptian idol, *Ba’al Tzephon* – it was then that we saw clearly that there was nothing real about these idols and false gods and finally abandoned them. This recognition was what truly made us free.

So what happened there that woke us up to the emptiness of idol worship?



Pesach



THE LAST IDOL STANDING

Ba'al Tzephon was the idol that “guarded” the entrance to Egypt. During the final plague – the death of the first born – Hashem destroyed all of the Egyptian idols; the ones that were made of metal, melted; the ones that were made of stone, broke; the ones made of clay pottery, cracked; and the ones that were made of wood, rotted.³ All of the Egyptian idols were destroyed during the last plague with the exception of just one: *Ba'al Tzephon*.

Why did Hashem spare that one idol? Hashem wanted to give the Egyptians an opportunity to stumble and choose to think that their idols wielded real power. The Midrash⁴ tells us that when the Egyptians saw that the Children of Israel had turned around when they reached *Ba'al Tzephon*, encamping before it, appearing lost and stopped cold in their tracks, Pharaoh thought that it was this idol who was the cause for this strange behaviour and he began to slaughter animals, burn incense, and pour libations in service to it.

As a result of this episode, Pharaoh and the Egyptians stumbled and decided to pursue the Children of Israel, confronting them at the Sea of Reeds, where Pharaoh and his entire army were drowned in the sea when Hashem, after having split those same waters for the Children of Israel, returned the waters to their place. (Some, however, say

that Pharaoh was spared at the sea, did teshuva, and later became the king of Nineveh, mentioned in the Book of Yonah which we read on Yom Kippur, which explains why the king of Nineveh was so quick to repent when informed by the prophet Yonah of Hashem's decision to destroy the city!)

GO IN SICK AND COME OUT HEALED

So, why was it only when we encamped by *Ba'al Tzephon* that we finally realised that there was nothing real about idols and their worship? What happened there to change our view of things?

The power of idol worship is explained⁵ in the gemara with a discussion regarding two episodes. In the first episode, someone asked Rabbi Akiva, since they both knew that there was nothing real about idols, that idols had no real power, how was it possible that they would see men who were crippled enter into idolatrous temples and come out seemingly cured! Rabbi Akiva answered with a parable: Imagine a trustworthy man who lived in a city where all of the townspeople deposited their money by him without the need for any witnesses for their deposits. There

was one man who insisted on using witnesses when he made his deposits. But, on one occasion, this same man forgot to bring witnesses and yet deposited his money anyways. The wife of this trustworthy man said to him, “Come, let's deny this man's deposit!” The trustworthy man said to her, “Because this fool acted in an inappropriate way, we should destroy our reputation for trustworthiness?”

So too, Rabbi Akiva explained, it was the same with sufferings that were sent to a person. At the time that sufferings are sent to a person, an oath is imposed on them that they will only come upon a man on such-and-such a day, and that they will only leave him on such-and-such a day, at such-and-such an hour, through the actions of so-and-so, and through such-and-such a medicine. What if it just so happens that, at the time when the sufferings are meant to leave the man, he walks into an idolatrous temple. The sufferings say, “It's right that we shouldn't leave him and make it seem like the man's decision to enter into the idolatrous temple had any influence whatsoever on our leaving him,” but then they consider the matter further and decide, “Because this fool acted inappropriately, we should have to break our oath?!” So too, our Sages taught that this is why the Torah refers⁶ to sufferings as “evil and faithful sicknesses”; “evil” – in their mission, “and faithful” – in their oath [ie. to go out when they swore to do so regardless of other events].

WHO'LL START THE RAIN

The gemara then continues with the second incident: There was an idolatrous temple in a certain place and whenever the world was in need of rain, [the idol] would appear to the people in a dream and say to them, “Slaughter a man to me and I will make it rain.” The people

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“HOW WAS IT POSSIBLE THAT THEY WOULD SEE MEN WHO WERE CRIPPLED ENTER INTO IDOLATROUS TEMPLES AND COME OUT CURED!”

would do as the idol said and slaughter a man to it, and the rain would come! Our Sages explain this episode using the following verse⁷ from the Torah that refers to idolatry, “So that you [ie. the Children of Israel] should not raise your eyes to heaven, and see the sun and the moon and the stars...and should be drawn away and bow to them and serve them... Hashem, your G-d, has allotted (*chalak*) them to all the nations...” In other words, Hashem made the words of the idols “smooth” (*hechalikan* – from the same root as *chalak*, allotted) so that the nations of the world could err, believing that their idols and the things that those idols said were real, in order that He could banish idolaters from the world.

THE POWER TO DECEIVE

From this passage we learn⁸ a fundamental lesson regarding the power of the *Satan*, the angel tasked with placing stumbling blocks before us. In truth, the *Satan* does not have the power to do anything, but what it can do is deceive us and show us with certainty that it made everything! This is what was going on in the first episode in the gemara – regarding the people who went in to the idolatrous temple crippled and came out healed. The sufferings needed to go out at precisely that moment anyhow, just as they had previously sworn to do so. So, if, at that very moment that the sufferings were meant to go out, the man who was afflicted by them entered into an idolatrous temple, the sufferings would still be removed anyways because that’s when the sufferings were supposed to be removed, that’s when they had sworn that they would go out. While the idol, like the *Satan*, has absolutely no power to do anything, let alone heal, it does, however, have the ability to lie and take credit for healing.

And it’s the same regarding the sec-



ond episode brought in the gemara – regarding the rain falling after the man was slaughtered to the idol. The rain needed to come at that instant regardless. The idol said to slaughter a man to show that it was bringing the rain, but, in truth, the rain was going to fall anyhow. The sole power of the idol is to “smooth” with words – what we’d call nowadays a “smooth talker”, someone who can be very convincing with his words even though he’s really lying through his teeth. But, to actually do something – to do anything – that the idol simply has no power to do.

A TERRIFYING POWER

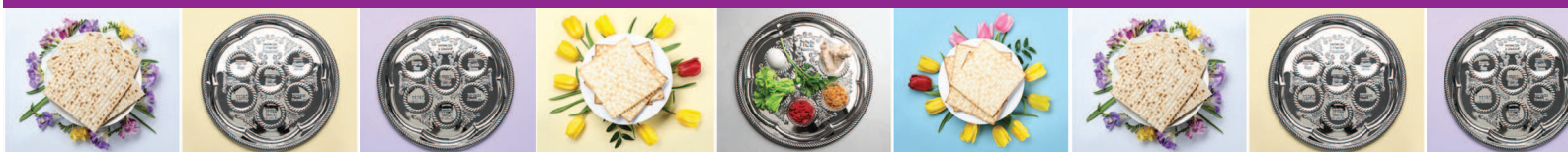
If the *Satan* had been granted the ability to do things from its own power, it would certainly be very limited in its ability to act, but now we can see that it actually has an incredibly awesome power because whatever Hashem can do, it can, in turn, claim responsibility for that very thing, appearing “all powerful” and without any limitations simply by its association with the Creator. In fact, other religions see the *Satan* as having the ability to challenge and defy G-d’s will, when, in reality, all it can do is take credit for things it never did.

In Egypt, the Children of Israel worshipped idols, never realising that there was nothing real about those idols, that the idols were, in fact, powerless – despite the fact that Hashem destroyed all of the Egyptian idols, save one, during the last plague. Why? Even though Hashem was clearly stronger, handily defeating the Egyptian idols in an incredible display of His power, that didn’t mean that those idols didn’t have any power at all; it just meant that, in comparison to Hashem, they were much weaker. For example, when we see two rivals arguing and the one is clearly stronger than the other, this isn’t a proof that the weaker one is completely and utterly lacking in ability and strength. Therefore, even though the Children of Israel witnessed the strength of Hashem against all of the Egyptian idols, they were still not freed from their desire to worship those idols because they couldn’t see that the idols were utterly powerless, not simply weaker in relative comparison to Hashem.

TRULY SEEING FOR THE FIRST TIME

But now that the Children of Israel had gone out from Egypt, something new happened: they entered into the domain of Hashem and they saw not only the downfall of the Egyptian gods, but also the falseness of them.

“THEY WOULD DO AS THE IDOL SAID AND SLAUGHTER A MAN TO IT, AND THE RAIN WOULD COME!”



What did they see?

Hashem said, “Turn back and encamp before *Pi HaChiros*,” so the Children of Israel turned around and headed back towards Egypt. Pharaoh was convinced that his god, *Ba’al Tzephon*, had the Children of Israel in its grasp and was “causing” them to return to him. This was, as we have explained above, the well-known conduct of these false gods and idols, connecting everything that Hashem does to themselves and claiming credit for it!

Until now, the Children of Israel had been stuck by Pharaoh and saw things only from the perspective of the false gods and idols. But, now that they had entered into Hashem’s domain, they saw both sides of what was happening and they could finally see the falseness of the Egyptian gods. Hashem had said to them to stay there in *Pi HaChiros* and the Egyptian idol subsequently took credit for this action, saying: “They’re in my grasp!” and Pharaoh

cried out, “Our god is all-powerful; it has trapped Israel!”

The Children of Israel could now see everything and, for the first time, they had the ability to see clearly how Hashem gives the power to idols to deceive their worshippers and to cry out falsely on Hashem’s deeds, claiming that those deeds, in fact, belong to them, when, in truth, the idols have no power whatsoever to do anything other than to lie and to deceive people – akin to looking behind the curtain and seeing the reality of the “great and powerful Oz”. Now, when the Children of Israel saw clearly the foundation of falseness and lies upon which those false gods and idols stood, they finally merited to be truly free from the desire to believe in them and to worship them. And that was the point at which we became truly free from the shackles of Egypt. **IL**

Based upon Tiferes Shimshon al HaTorah (Shemos) – Parshas Beshalach



¹Shemos 14:2

²Midrash Tehilim 1:20, 15:5; Yalkut Reuveini Beshalach 82, 89 (with thanks to Aron Ziegler for locating this reference)

³Tamtzis HaTargum

⁴Tanchuma Beshalach 8

⁵Avodah Zarah 55a

⁶Devarim 28:59

⁷Devarim 4:19

⁸Rabbi Shimshon Dovid Pincus heard this explanation from Rabbi Yosef Liss who had heard it from the Brisker Rav

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