

Parashat Va'era 5784, 2024:

Nitzutz HaYehudi—The Eternal Spark of the Jew

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ה' יעזור וירחם על אחינו, כל בני ישראל בארץ ישראל ובכל חלקי האר

Our Sages maintain that Hashem performed ten miracles for our forefathers in Egypt. (*Pirkei Avot* V:4). The Rambam (1135-1204), Rabbeinu Yonah (d. 1264) and the Ritva (1260-1320), among others, interpret this statement as referring to the ten *Makkot*. Pharaoh is warned in our *parasha* that if he refuses to let our ancestors go and serve the Almighty, *arov*, the fourth of these will pummel his nation:

“... I [Hashem] will incite against you and against your servants and against your people and in your houses the *arov*, and the houses of Egypt will be filled with the *arov*, as well as the land upon which they are. And I will separate (*v'hiflati*) on that day the land of Goshen, upon which My people stand, that there will be no *arov* there, in order that you know that I am Hashem in the midst of the earth. And I will make a division (*v'samti fedut*) between My people and your people; this sign will come about tomorrow.” (*Sefer Shemot* 8:17-19, this and all Tanach translations with my emendations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Arov connotes a mixture of some kind; the text, however, does not reveal its composition. This leads Rashi (1040-1105) to suggest the following interpretation: “[it includes] all species of wild beasts, snakes, and scorpions in a mixture, and these played havoc among them. (*Commentary on the Torah, Sefer Shemot* 8:17) In addition, Rashi opines that use of the terms *v'hiflati* and *v'samti fedut* in our *pasukim* underscores the notion that the Egyptians, alone, will suffer *makkat arov*. As such, Rashi states: “This [*fedut*] will make a division (*sh'yavdil*) between My people [the Jews] and your people [the Egyptians].” (8:19)

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as the “Rav” by his followers and disciples, expands on Rashi’s explanation, and uses it as an opportunity to

explore the first three *havdalot* found in *tefilat Havdalah*: the separations that obtain between the holy and profane, light and darkness, and between the Jewish people and the nations of the world. While at first glance they may appear to be similar, the Rav notes that there is a fundamental difference between them:

The *havdalah* between light and darkness is clear for all to perceive. Indeed, even animals and plants respond to these stimuli; with the arrival of sunset, flowers close their blossoms, and when the sun rises, the blossoms open to face it. The *havdalah* of light and darkness is a *havdalah* that is seen or sensed by all. (This and the following quotations, *Chumash HaRav, Sefer Shemot*, page 67)

In short, the *havdalah bain ohr l'choshek* is recognized by all living beings, whether plants or animals. This is not the case, however, regarding the distinction between *kodesh* and *chol*: “The eye cannot perceive this *havdalah*. A person needs to have special intuition, to see with his heart, as this separation can only be sensed.” Thus, the first two *havdalot* are markedly different; the *havdalah* between light and darkness is clear to one and all, whereas the *havdalah* between the holy and profane is “the most hidden.”

According to the Rav, the *havdalah* between the Jewish people and the nations of the world shares elements of the first two *havdalot*, that become fully actualized through holiness: “When Jews keep the commandments, when they live their lives as a holy nation, the contrast between Israel and the nations becomes evident to all. When the Jew abandons God, however, no longer is there obvious evidence of *havdalah*.” This, however, states the Rav, should not lead to a loss of hope, for even when our people have turned away from the Almighty, the connection between ourselves and the Holy One blessed be He remains eternal: “Yet as mired in sin as the Jew may be, deep in the Jewish soul there remains something holy and mysterious, which can neither be erased nor destroyed.”

What is this holy and mysterious entity that remains deep in the Jewish soul? It is the *pintele Yid*, the *nitzutz haYehudi*, the eternally burning spark that can never be extinguished, no matter how far a Jew may drift away from Hashem, the Torah and the *mitzvot*. *Chazal* note in a variety of *midrashim* and kabbalistic sources, that both the Egyptians and the Jewish people at this time were idol worshippers (*Midrash Tehillim* 1:20, 15:5, *Zohar*, Parashat Terumah 170). As the Rav explains, however, even though “one could barely perceive a contrast between them...the Master of the Universe indeed separated between them.” He did this because, “He discerned holiness in the soul, which was profane and full of sin, and therefore saved His people.”

May the time come soon, and in our time, when the *nitzutz haYehudi* will burn bright as the sun in the souls of us all, and may Hashem bring us back to Him *b’ahavah rabbah*—in great love. As Yirmiyahu the prophet said so long ago: “*Hashiveinu Hashem alecha v’nashuvah, chadeish yameinu k’kedem*—Cause us to come back to You, Hashem, and we will return! Renew our days as of old.” (*Megillat Eichah* 5:21) *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik’s English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav](#)