

BO (EXODUS 10:1-13:16)

Don't Confuse Me With The Facts...I've Already Made Up My Mind!

2001 · Rabbi Yerachmiel Sepowitz

The very first Passover is rapidly approaching. You have repeatedly reprimanded the king of Egypt and warned him to let G-d's People go and serve Him. The Pharaoh has responded with promise after broken promise to let them go. You and your brother Aaron have wreaked havoc on the Egyptians by afflicting them nine times with G-d's miraculous plagues. Egypt is in shambles. The king's own advisers have begged him to wake up and smell the coffee and realize that he is destroying his own country by continuing to disregard G-d's demands.

Now it's time to take off the kid gloves and get tough!

Moses told the king, *"G-d said, 'at about midnight, I will go out into the midst of Egypt. Every firstborn will die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh sitting on his throne, to the firstborn of the (Egyptian) slave girl behind the millstone, and the firstborn animals as well.'"* (Exodus, 11:4-5)

An interesting choice of words. *"About midnight."* In fact, the Torah tells us later on that the tenth plague took place precisely *"AT midnight."* (12:29) Why did Moses choose the inaccurate description of *"about"* midnight?

Rashi explains that Moses was concerned about human error. G-d had told him that the plague was scheduled to take place at exactly midnight. However, Moses feared that the Egyptians would miscalculate the precise moment of midnight. They would look at their "watches" (hourglasses?) and see that midnight had come and gone, and yet the firstborn of Egypt were still alive and well. Moses would be branded as a liar. By saying that the plague would come *"about midnight,"* Moses hoped to avoid the negative P.R.

Rashi's explanation is difficult to understand. What was Moses worried about? Who cares if the Egyptian "clocks" are off by a few minutes? What difference would it make if they made a mistake? Even if the Egyptians erred and thought that the plague was a false alarm, they would certainly find out the truth two minutes later! They would learn, when midnight actually arrived, that Moses was right. They would then understand that G-d was killing their firstborn because they had refused to release the Israelites from slavery. Why was Moses afraid of being called a liar?

By making allowance for the margin of Egyptian error, Moses demonstrated great insight into human nature. When we hear what we don't want to hear, we will find any excuse to discredit it. Moses understood the Egyptian psyche. If they could somehow come up with a way to disparage Moses, even by claiming a two-minute discrepancy in his prophesy, they would ignore the whole message and deny that G-d had sent him. It didn't matter that Moses had predicted the other plagues. It didn't matter that the G-d of Moses and Israel had decimated Egypt with miracle after miracle. The fact is that Moses was off on the time, and therefore he's a liar, and therefore, we're not letting the Israelites go!

People think the way they want to think, and then look for excuses to justify their "logic." Sound unreasonable? Do you think that people don't really think that way? Let's examine an event in recent American history.

Two years ago, this country was hotly divided over a close election. Half the country felt that George W. Bush was trying to steal the election, and the other half felt the same way about Al Gore. Half of us thought that the Florida Supreme Court justices were political hacks and that the U.S. Supreme Court had wisely and judiciously straightened them out. The rest feel that the U.S. Court made a partisan decision to overrule the sagacity of the Florida Court.

Each side pointed to the supposed dishonesty of the other side. Isn't it interesting that Republicans only see the point of view that favors their man, and that Democrats see it exactly the other way?!

I have a number of relatives and close friends whose political affiliations and leanings differ with my own. (I am making every effort to keep my personal political views out of this and other articles. A sermon/Torah Talk is no place to vent one's own political agenda.) I am often amazed by the negative e-mails I receive about public figures whom I respect, and positive e-mails about people whom I disdain. I (usually) don't respond.

People tend to see the value of their own position and immediately reject anything that negates that position. Don't we get frustrated when people argue with what WE consider to be valid opinions?

The same thing happens in familial relationships. How often does it happen that husbands and wives, parents and children, are too busy defending their own positions to actually LISTEN to what the other person is saying? Instead, we look for an inconsistency, a two-minute miscalculation of midnight, and use that as the weapon to destroy the other side's argument and justify our own, sometimes-UNJUSTIFIABLE attitudes.

The word "Torah" means "teaching." If we look for excuses to ignore the profound lessons of the Torah, we will certainly find them. It is our responsibility to open our minds to the Torah's wisdom, and to synchronize our "spiritual clocks" to its timeless message.

Have a great Shabbos.

