

Parashat Bo

Is there any Spiritual Difference between Jew and Gentile?

My non-Jewish Goy Friend

When I was a teenager in Denmark, the name of my best friend who lived across the street was Goy! We had lots of fun together making recordings, interviews and our own made-up youth programs. I was not surprised when she became a journalist with a high position in Denmark's Radio. We later laughed about the meaning of the name 'Goy' as she was my only non-Jewish friend who actually made it to my very Jewish wedding at King David's Tomb. In my group of nature loving friends, who played guitar, read Herman Hesse and Carlos Castaneda, it made hardly any difference whether or not you were Jewish. We all connected together in our mutual adoration of the Native Americans and the spiritual saints of the Far East. When I moved to Israel and embraced the Torah lifestyle, I became separated from my old non-Jewish friends in Denmark. I still care about them and respect them, but our lives have grown apart. One of the things that actually brought me to Torah is my own experience of the inherent spiritual difference between Jews and non-Jews. As I was hitchhiking alone through Europe at the age of 19, I was naturally vulnerable and sought security among other travelers. That's when I realized that I felt most safe in the company of fellow-Jews. I learned to spot other Jews in a crowd wherever I travelled. I instinctually felt a difference when I looked into their eyes. It was as if the eyes of a Jew were deeper – the mirrors of a deeper soul.

Deliverance from Spiritual Assimilation

Whenever Jews live assimilated lives in a non-Jewish society for an extended period of time, the difference between us becomes blurred as we take on the non-Jewish lifestyle, fashion, menu and culture. The root and beginning of such assimilation took place in the Egyptian exile, where we were absorbed for 210 years. Therefore, Hashem needed to use signs, wonders and plagues in order to extract the Jewish souls from our non-Jewish society, not only physically but also emotionally and spiritually. The miracles that Hashem performed in Egypt were not only to punish the Egyptians but especially "to awaken the Jews to the peril of the decadence and ugliness of the Egyptian way of life. Thus, each of the plagues accentuated a different aspect of Egyptian depravity. Far from simply being punishments for their misdeeds, the Ten Plagues focused a radiant bright light on the Egyptian culture from which the Jewish people had to be liberated. The redemption from bondage to false ideas and immoral practices is not as easily accomplished as the breaking of physical chains and shackles. This liberation is the truly great story of The Exodus, which is sadly so often overlooked" (Eliezer Ben David, *Out of the Iron Furnace* p. 36). All future assimilations are included in the way we were absorbed in Egypt, as a nation within a nation.

ספר דברים פרק ד (לד) או הנסה אלהים לבוא לקחת לו גוי מקרב גוי במסות באות ובמופתים ובמלחמה וביד חזקה ובזרוע נטויה ובמוראים גדלים ככל אשר עשה לכם השם אלהיכם במצרים לעיניך:
 "Or has G-d ventured to go and take Him one nation from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs, and by wonders, and by war, and by a mighty hand, and by an outstretched arm, and by an awesome power, according to all that Hashem your G-d did for you in Egypt before your very eyes?" (*Devarim* 4:34).

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From this verse, Rabbeinu Bachaya learns that “the Israelites had become similar to the Egyptians. They would walk in their ways, worship their gods and wear the same hairstyle.” We are still awaiting Hashem’s mighty hand to shake us out of our current assimilation.

Lessons of Morality from the Plagues in Egypt

The lessons of each of the Ten Plagues that liberated us from one of the aspects of our assimilation, into which we were absorbed, are still pertinent today. This week’s *parasha* contains the last three culminating plagues through which we were able to emerge from Egypt. The lesson of the Plague of Locust is to rectify our sense of seeing that may have been influenced by the secular media. We need to learn to free ourselves from the misuse of our eyesight that easily becomes prey to petty enticing externals. This lesson is alluded to in the Plague of the Locust described as blocking the human eyesight.

ספר שמות פרק י (ה) וְכִסָּה אֶת עֵין הָאָרֶץ וְלֹא יוּכַל לִרְאוֹת אֶת הָאָרֶץ...

“They shall cover the face of the earth so no-one can see the face of the earth...” (*Shemot* 10:5).

The lesson of the Plague of Darkness is to teach us proper parameters of relationship. During this plague “they did not see one another, neither did anyone rise from his place for three days” (*Shemot* 10:23). This was a “time-out” for reflecting on whom to associate with, as each person leaves a mark upon our character. Which family members, friends, close or casual, acquaintances, colleges etc. help strengthen us in serving Hashem, and which distance us from His service? During these three days, each person was completely cut off from his fellow. The message was clear: When the light once again returns and you set about to reestablish your relationships, do so in the bright light, not in the darkness of the Egyptian influence (Eliezer ben David, *ibid* p. 136).

The Plague of the Firstborn was the culmination of the deliverance of Israel from within Egypt. The firstborn symbolizes the very best. The Egyptians took the best that they had – their great wisdom, creativity and industry and dedicated it to the forces of evil. In contrast, Israel must dedicate all the Firsts to Hashem (*ibid* p. 140). This final distinguishing plague was the only plague in which Israel had to actively participate, as it states,

ספר שמות פרק יב (ז) וְהִלְקִחוּ מִן הַדָּם וְנָתְנוּ עַל שְׁתֵי הַמְּזוּזוֹת וְעַל הַמַּשְׁקוּף עַל הַבָּתִּים...

“They shall take of the blood, and put it on the two *mezuzot* – side-posts and on the lintel, upon the houses...” (*Shemot* 12:7).

The holiday celebrating our Exodus is called Pesach to commemorate that Hashem *פָּסַח*/*pasach* – skipped over the houses of the Israelites, “when He smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses” (*ibid*. 27). The fact that Hashem had to “skip over” the Jewish homes during the Plague of the Firstborn, testifies that the Israelites had become so assimilated that they lived among the Egyptians – in the very hearts of their neighborhoods. Taking the blood of the ram worshiped by the Egyptians and smearing it on their doorposts became the sign of a Jewish home. It is interesting that to this day, the mezuzah graces the homes of some of the most assimilated Jews, distinguishing their houses from their gentile neighbor’s and reminding them of their Jewishness.

Signs of Distinction Shaking us out of Assimilation

It seems to me that during the archetypal exile which included all future exiles, Hashem taught us eternal lessons to help inculcate within us the inherent difference between Jews and non-Jews throughout all our future exiles. Thus, each of the Ten Plagues distinguished between the Children of Israel and the Egyptian society – from the blood of the first plague to the blood of the last plague of the firstborn. The midrash states that during the plague of blood, the only way the Egyptians could drink water was when they purchased it from a Jew. Even if they tried to drink from the same cup of an Israelite, the water in the cup would turn to blood only for the Egyptians (*Midrash Rabbah, Shemot* 9:11). Thus, each plague distinguished between Jew and non-Jew as for example in the plague of darkness, which did not affect Israel one bit.

ספר שמות פרק י' (כג) ... וְלִכְל בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הָיָה אֹר בְּמוֹשְׁבֵתָם:

“...But all of the children of Israel, had light in their dwellings” (*Shemot* 10:23).

Knowing our Jewish Difference while Respecting the Greatness of Gentiles

I am one of the many Jews who grew up side by side with gentiles, wearing the same fashions, reading the same books, using the same smartphones and dancing to similar music. It is sometimes hard to believe that there is any inherent difference between a Jew and a non-Jew. When we look so similar on the outside how can there be any substantial difference on the inside? From the *Zohar*, the *Kuzari* to the *Tanya*, the Torah is replete with teachings about the spiritual difference between Jews and gentiles. According to Rabbi Yehuda HaLevi, only a Jew has the capability to become a true prophet (*Kuzari* 1:115). There is a fine line between knowing our Jewish difference while still respecting all humankind. Rav Kook teaches us about the importance of loving all humankind, “despite all variations of religions, opinions, and faiths, and race...” He condemns “the narrowness that causes us to regard other nations as ugly and defiled,” and calls it a terrible darkness “that brings general destruction upon all building of spiritual good, for the light of which every refined soul hopes” (*Mussar Avicha* p. 58). Rambam even credits every person including gentiles with the ability to reach the greatest holiness. “Not only the tribe of Levi, but every single person from all inhabitants of the world (מכל באי העולם/*m'kol ba'ei ha-olam*) whose spirit guides him, and whose intellect leads him to understand... know G-d and walk straight as G-d created him... he is sanctified with the greatest holiness (קדוש קדשים/*kodesh kedoshim*)... (*Mishna Torah, Laws of Sabbatical and Jubilee Years* 13:13).

The Unquestionable Distinction of the Jewish Soul

As Rambam teaches, not every non-Jew is an evil oppressor, like Pharaoh, Haman and Hitler. Parallel with our cruel and murderous enemies, there is a growing non-denominational new-age movement including many righteous gentiles, who believe in one G-d, mindfulness, kindness, and *Tikun Olam* (repairing the world). Many of them such as Louise Hay, Carolyn Myss, Wayne Dyer, and Neal Donald Walch seem to have reached very high levels of consciousness, as well as being involved in righteous deeds for the sake of the betterment of the world. People like these, make it hard to believe that non-Jews possess only an animal soul, whereas Jews exclusively have a Divine soul. The *Zohar* teaches that there are five parts to the Jewish soul: *nefesh*, *ruach*, *neschama*, *chaya* and *yechida* (*Zohar* 1:267a, *hasmatot*). Without going into the nature of each of these soul levels, I believe that the reason why we may often feel spiritually similar to high-level gentiles is that we Jews are still not manifesting the many levels of our spiritual capacity. Most of us may only be

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operating on the lowest *nefesh* level, which we surely share with all humankind. I believe that righteous gentiles may reach at least the level of *ruach* as the midrash teaches that every person can receive *ruach hakodesh*. If gentiles have the ability to become divinely inspired with *ruach hakodesh*, their soul certainly has the potential to operate not only on the level of *nefesh* but also on the level of *ruach*:

ילקוט שמעוני שופטים - פרק ד - המשך רמז מב מעיד אני עלי את השמים ואת הארץ בין גוי בין ישראל בין איש בין אשה בין עבד בין שפחה הכל לפי מעשיו של אדם רוח הקדש שורה עליו:
 "May heavens and earth stand witness, be it a gentile or a Jew, be it a man or a woman, be it a male-servant or maid-servant, according to a person's actions is he worthy of *ruach hakodesh*"
 (*Yalkut Shimoni, Shoftim 4*).

The Jewish soul, however, has an even higher potential than reaching *ruach hakodesh*. Encoded within the *yechida* level of the Jewish soul is the eternal bond that makes us incapable of being separated from G-d. Only when we obtain the spiritual recharge of the Temple in Jerusalem, (may it be soon!) will we Jews be able to access this hidden soul level that gives us the capacity to once again become prophets. At that time, the spiritual distinction of a Jewish soul will become unquestionable.