

## Sanctify for Me every firstborn of Bnei Yisrael, of man and animal, they are Mine. (13:2)

The *mitzvah* of *Pidyon HaBen*, redeeming the firstborn, is directly connected to *yetzias Mitzrayim*, the Egyptian exodus. Hashem refers to the *bechorim*, first born: *Li hu*, "They are Mine." *Rashi* explains that Hashem smote the Egyptian firstborn and spared their Jewish counterparts. He acquired the Jewish firstborn. The decree was solely directed towards the Egyptian firstborn; *makas bechoros*, the plague of the smiting of the firstborn, was the *coupe de grace* of the ten *makkos*, plagues, with which Hashem struck the Egyptians. What does it have to do with the Jews?

*Horav Shlomo Wolbe, zl*, cites a *Novoradok* (*Yeshivas Bais Yosef*, established by the *Alter of Novoradok*, *Horav Yosef Yoizel Horowitz, zl*) aphorism: "When a person reads an obituary in the newspaper, he tends to think that there is a group of 'people who die.' He, of course, is not connected to them. They die, he does not. It is a quirk of fate that they succumbed to whatever illness that ended their lives. It does not dawn on him that he, too, sometime in the future, will join that group. It is all about 'yennem' – the other fellow. It is never about me."

The *Mashgiach* quotes a well-known saying from the *Baal Shem Tov, zl*, "The world is like a mirror; everything a person sees has something to do with him." If Hashem made one privy to certain people, events, experiences – it is because they have some connection to him. Hashem wants him to introspect and derive the intended message. The smiting of the firstborn, like all events preceding it, was a personal and collective lesson for the Jew to consider. All firstborn were acquired by Hashem. He chose to smite the Egyptians, and, simultaneously, allow the Jews to live. It was not by chance – because nothing is by chance. Hashem plans everything to the minutest detail. Every experience serves as a lesson. Thus, *Klal Yisrael* was enjoined to heed that lesson and sanctify their firstborn.

There is a secular quote which has spawned variations: "You do not see the world as it is. You see it as you are." This means: Life is a mirror; its reflection shines back an image of ourselves. We see what we want to see. There is a classic oft-repeated story, which, over time, has changed names and venues, but the timeless lesson remains the same. It is about a poor man in eastern Europe (where else?) who owned a small shop from which he barely eked out a living. His lack of funds did not affect his kindheartedness to whomever he could offer assistance. He was there to help others.

One day, as he was standing outside his shop, a visitor to town came by and stopped. This visitor was a holy man, the *tzaddik*, *Horav Moshe Leib Sassover, zl* (one of the earliest *Rebbes*). The man (whom we will call Avraham) welcomed the visitor and offered him a drink. He did not have any extra food, but a hot drink was no problem. He shared some food with the visitor and welcomed him to the town saying, "If I can help you in any way, do not hesitate to ask." The saintly *Rebbe* was moved by Avraham's selflessness and generosity, despite his lack of material bounty.

Therefore, prior to leaving, he blessed Avraham with the ability to continue his good deeds amid wealth, so that his extraordinary benevolence could reach a greater multitude of people in need.

The *brachah* was realized, with Avraham's business suddenly picking up to the point that it was necessary for him to expand his shop and hire more employees. There was no question: Avraham was on the road to becoming a very wealthy man. He opened up more stores and moved out of his tiny hovel at the end of town and built himself a fitting mansion on the town's main artery. The problem that unfortunately occurs concerning wealth is that its beneficiary does not always know how to deal with the challenges it presents. Avraham suffered from the newfound wealth malady. The money went to his head. He no longer had time for people, delegating his *tzedakah*, charitable fund, to a surrogate who, albeit doling out checks, did so impersonally: "Next!" Avraham was locked in his inner office with time only for wealthy businessmen who came to consult with him or purchase his products. He was shielded from the simple folk who not only needed his money, but also craved his smile, embrace and good wishes. That was all replaced by secretaries and managers who were present to protect their boss from the common folk.

Rav Moshe Leib Sassover had occasion to visit the town again and, after hearing the negative consequence of his *brachah*, he decided to pay a visit to Avraham. Avraham was only too happy to greet the *Rebbe* whose blessing had transformed his life. He exuded profound gratitude to the *Rebbe* and reiterated a number of times that he was prepared to assist the *Rebbe* in any endeavor he chose. He was eager to show the *Rebbe* his new home and describe his untold success. After touring the mansion, they returned to the vestibule which led to the front entrance. Hung prominently on the wall was an ornate, filigree mirror. Its beauty was captivating. It truly must have set Avraham back a small fortune. It was a delicate masterpiece of artistic beauty.

The *Rebbe* asked Avraham, "When you look in the mirror, what do you see?" "What is the question?" Avraham replied, "I see myself and the exquisite furnishings that are reflected in its view." The *Rebbe* then walked Avraham to the massive picture window and asked him what he saw. "I see people walking back and forth. Truth be told, I have no idea who they are, since I am so busy locked away in my office, attending to my many business interests. Wait, I know a few of them from my earlier days." He then began to describe each one's adversity and hardship.

The *Rebbe* asked, "I do not understand. The window is made of glass as is the mirror. Why does it reflect diverse images?" Avraham was a bit puzzled by the *Rebbe's* "ignorance." He replied, "*Rebbe*, the mirror has a silver finish in the back which essentially converts it from glass to mirror. As Avraham was speaking, the *Rebbe's* purpose in distinguishing between glass and the mirror suddenly dawned on him. The silver lining representing Avraham's wealth was blocking his view of others. He only saw himself. He had lost his focus, his special touch; his empathy and caring had disappeared behind the silver. That night Avraham made a huge party and invited all the townspeople. He apologized for having been selfish and ignoring their plight. He then took a sharp knife and scraped off the silver on one corner of the mirror, exposing the glass. This would serve as a reminder of the holy *Rebbe's* lesson. At times, we need to be reminded that our vision is

impaired by our subjectivity.