



*“Words from the Heart  
Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo

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January 19, 2013

Bo

**Midnight Mystique:  
The Moment of Choice**



# Meaningful Sermons *“Words from the Heart Enter the Heart”*

SHEMOT > Bo > Midnight Mystique: The Moment of Choice  
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## ABSTRACT

What is it about midnight? Whether you are a night owl or not midnight connotes intrigue. How many special things happen when the clock strikes twelve?

The mystique of midnight has permeated modern culture. Remember Cinderella? At midnight her coach turned into a pumpkin, and her beautiful ball gown into rags. There are actually flowers, like the Kadupul flower, that bloom at midnight.

Why at midnight and not before? What is it about midnight?

If you Google that question, you learn that “midnight” literally means “middle of the night” – therefore, this is the time of the most intense darkness or gloom. But as Jews we do not accept that on face value. Rather we look for an answer where all answers are found – in the Torah.

The power of midnight, like so many other phenomena, is rooted in this week’s Torah portion, where we read Moses words: “This is what God says: ‘Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt.’” But why did Moses change God’s words, which stated that this would take place exactly “at midnight,” not “around midnight”?!

This sermon analyzes this mysterious change, and how it teaches us the secret not just about this time of night, but how to use it as a solution to resolve doubts and discover clarity and certainty amidst confusion.

This message is especially relevant as we approach Yud Shvat, the 63rd anniversary of the Previous Rebbe's passing and the Rebbe's assumption of leadership. The third chapter in Basi L'Gani, which we study this year, teaches us about the power of every Jewish spirit to overcome our doubts, including the "foolishness" and "insanity" of our material lives - as illustrated in a poignant story about a man who approached the Rebbe overwhelmed by a difficult situation, and the Rebbe's surprising words about the strangeness of the midnight hour.

## MIDNIGHT MYSTIQUE: THE MOMENT OF CHOICE

### 1. Do You Burn the Midnight Oil?

Some of us are night owls, and some not. Do you usually go to sleep before or after midnight? This surely can evoke a lively debate between us. Some people cannot, for the life of them, understand how anyone can go to sleep at, say, 10PM. And others cannot understand how anyone can stay awake into the wee hours.

Then there are, of course, those that would prefer to be asleep whenever possible - early and late. As Hemingway famously said: *I love sleep. My life has a tendency to fall apart when I'm awake, you know?* (And we all know how his life tragically ended).

Then there is the quote, author unknown: *I'm not asleep... but that doesn't mean I'm awake.*

But no matter how you are wired (or programmed), midnight carries intrigue with it. How many special things happen when the clock strikes twelve?

Walt Whitman captured it eloquently in *A Clear Midnight*:

This is thy hour O Soul, thy free flight into the wordless,  
Away from books, away from art, the day erased, the lesson done,  
Thee fully forth emerging, silent, gazing, pondering the themes thou  
lovest best.  
Night, sleep, and the stars.

## 2. What Is It About Midnight?

The mystique of midnight has permeated modern culture.

What is it about midnight?

What is so special about that time when the clock strikes twelve?

Remember Cinderella? At midnight her coach turned into a pumpkin,  
and her beautiful ball gown into rags.

Remember the nursery rhyme? "As the clock struck twelve, cats and  
dogs rained from the sky and flooded the streets with meows and barks  
that you could hear all the way to the park."

Remember this famous Eric Clapton song?

After midnight, we're gonna let it all hang down.

After midnight, we're gonna chug-a-lug and shout.

We're gonna stimulate some action;

We're gonna get some satisfaction.

We're gonna find out what it is all about.

There are actually flowers, like the Kadupul flower, that bloom at  
midnight.

Why after midnight and not before?

What is it about midnight?

### 3. The Meaning of Midnight

If you Google that question, you learn that “midnight” literally means “middle of the night” – therefore, this is the time of the most intense darkness or gloom.

But as Jews we do not accept that on face value. Rather we look for an answer where all answers are found – in the Torah.

The power of midnight, like so many other phenomena, is rooted in this week’s Torah portion.

And Moses said [to Pharaoh]: “This is what God says: ‘*Around midnight*, I will go out in the midst of Egypt. Every first-born in Egypt will die.’”<sup>1</sup>

### 4. Why Around Midnight?

Moses’ words “around midnight” pose an obvious question, which the Talmud asks: Why did Moses say “around midnight,” and not “at midnight”?

And the Talmud<sup>2</sup> answers:

We cannot say that “around midnight” were the exact words of God that Moses was repeating, because is there any doubt in heaven as to the exact moment of midnight? If Moses was speaking in his own name and he was the one designating the time, then we could say that Moses approximated the time, since a mortal cannot know the exact moment when night is the darkest. But Moses was repeating *the words of God*, who surely knows that precise hour. God, therefore, must have said “at midnight” – and not “around midnight.” Indeed, we later read:

“It was midnight when the plague struck.”<sup>3</sup>

Note that it says “midnight” and not “around midnight.”

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<sup>1</sup> Exodus 11:4-5.

<sup>2</sup> Berochos 3b.

<sup>3</sup> Exodus 12:29.

The Talmud<sup>4</sup> goes on to suggest that Moses said “around midnight” (even though he heard from God that it would happen “exactly at midnight”), out of his concern that Pharaoh’s astrologers might miscalculate the time of midnight and think that it had come and gone with no plague inflicted. They would then accuse Moses of being a charlatan. Therefore, he deliberately changed the precise time he heard from God and, instead, said “around midnight.”

Okay, that’s one way of looking at it.

But why did Moses speak in the name of God, saying precisely: “*This is what God says: ‘Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt’*”?!

## 5. Baal Shem Tov’s Explanation

The Baal Shem Tov, the 18th century founder of the Chassidic Movement, has an explanation:

This equivocation by Moses – suggesting his personal doubts and reservations – actually contains the secret to clarity and certainty!

How?

Well, we all have our doubts. Is there a sure way to resolve doubts? A way to discover certainty amidst confusion?

Often we feel confident about a certain approach. But the consequences are high. Is there a way to be sure? How can we know if our position is the right one and not driven by other interests?

In this episode, Moses is actually offering us a fundamental lesson in life – how to resolve doubts both in our personal lives, in our careers, and in our manner of serving God.

We all know it – life is fraught with dilemmas. How can we know how to choose wisely when we have several choices and options before us?

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<sup>4</sup> Berochos 4a. Cited in Rashi 11:4.

Often we may feel confident in taking a certain approach, but how can we be sure that this is the right path? Subjectivity, bias and self-interest can cloud our judgments and decisions.

And temptation – better known as the *yetzer hara*, the “evil inclination” – is very cunning and shrewd. Sometimes it dresses itself up in “holy garments” and makes a strong case for a particular plan of action, which looks ostensibly “divine,” when in fact it is anything but.

How can we know the right path when in doubt, especially when an option seems appealing to us but we’re not sure?

## 6. Rabbi Leizeron’s Story (Optional)

Let me illustrate this with a story told by Rabbi Avraham Leizeron, the chairman of Chinuch Atzmai, the independent religious education system in Israel.<sup>5</sup>

In 1992, Rabbi Leizeron had come from Israel to the United States for a convention, and while in New York, ran into a man who knew his father.

Now, Rabbi Leizeron’s father had been a very pious man, a great Chassid and a great Torah scholar, and this man asked him why he was not following in his father’s footsteps. He challenged Rabbi Leizeron: “Why are you wasting your time with communal work? Your father was completely immersed in Torah study. You should be too. Open a study group (*Kollel*) and if you do that, I will make a deal with you – I will fund it for several years.”

This man was very wealthy, and this was an astounding offer. Rabbi Leizeron admits that he was completely shaken by it, and he began to think about all the difficulties in his current work; how communal work on behalf of the Jewish public was rarely appreciated and always an uphill battle.

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<sup>5</sup> See interview at: [http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player\\_cdo/aid/1827334/jewish/The-Highest-Calling.htm](http://www.chabad.org/therebbe/livingtorah/player_cdo/aid/1827334/jewish/The-Highest-Calling.htm)

He relates: “These thoughts swirled in my head, and it crossed my mind that this was no ordinary event – that maybe this was a sign from Heaven. A stranger appears, perhaps a messenger from Above, and delivers these words of rebuke which affect me to the core.”

With these thoughts swirling in his mind, Rabbi Leizeron traveled next to Crown Heights where he hoped to get a blessing from the Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, whose 63rd anniversary of assuming leadership in 1950 we honor this week. He waited at the Chabad Headquarters at 770 Eastern Parkway for the Rebbe to finish the afternoon prayers and he approached him in the hallway: “I’m returning to Jerusalem today, and I would like a blessing before the trip.”

The Rebbe replied, “Have a safe trip. May you have great success.”

Rabbi Leizeron relates: “As he was blessing me, my mind was still racing with thoughts of the previous meeting. I could not shake free of my conversation with that man. I was thinking, ‘It might just be a good idea.’”

And suddenly, the Rebbe (who had continued on his way down the hallway) turned around. He walked back toward Rabbi Leizeron and said, as if reading his mind: “There is an opinion in Jewish law that one who involves himself with communal affairs sincerely, stands higher than one who studies Torah. Have a safe trip, and may you have great success.”

Rabbi Leizeron thought that a wealthy man had offered him the opportunity of a lifetime. He considered abandoning his life’s vocation, but was he correct?

After hearing the words of the Lubavitcher Rebbe, he reconsidered. And he has continued on his path of communal work. But there was a moment when he was about to be seduced – he did not know the right decision to make as the other option seemed so appealing.

What would you do?

## 7. The Essential Rule

Here is an essential rule: If one option appears particularly appealing, even compelling, and you feel strong and confident that this is the way to go, at that moment of surety make sure to challenge that approach and present an argument for the exact opposite option.

Especially critical is to ensure that you have no personal benefit or gain from one option over the other which might cloud your judgment.

This is an excellent method of making sure you arrive at the best possible decision.<sup>6</sup>

## 8. Deeper Meaning

Indeed, this is the deeper meaning in Moses' words: "This is what God says: 'Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt.'"

Day represents clarity. Night symbolizes confusion. Daylight allows us to clearly see the paths before us. Dark of night conceals everything around us, causing doubts.

When night comes and you are confused and in doubt how to act, acknowledge your doubt.

Doubt occurs "around midnight" - either before or after the midpoint of darkness - when an issue can go either way. Midnight represents the mid-point between two possibilities, a positive approach or a negative approach, either to do something or to refrain from doing it.

This means that, when you are in doubt, you should break down your options into two directions - one before and one after midnight, so to speak - and decide either to proceed with a particular plan, or not to proceed, either to go to the right or to the left.

And then, you should weigh all the arguments for each of the two options, and make sure to examine any subjective biases or self-interests that may slant your judgment toward one direction.

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<sup>6</sup> So writes the Baal HaToldos in explaining this approach.

## 9. Kabbalistic Insight (Optional)

The mystics understand it this way:

Midnight is the midpoint between loving kindness (*chesed*) and discipline (*gevurah*). The reconciliation happens at the level of knowledge – of discretion and balance (*daat*). And Moses represents this reconciliation.

When a person breaks confusion into two options – “around midnight,” that is to say either before midnight or after – then God enters into that person’s confusion and clears it up. The confusion is limited knowledge, or narrowness, as Egypt (*Mitzrayim*) is known in Hebrew. And God enlightens/expands that person.

And then – as “every first-born in Egypt will die” – every doubt that comes from the evil inclination also will die, and doubt will be dispelled.

## 10. A Remarkable Solution

When you think about it, this is a remarkable solution to resolving doubts.

Doubt is an energy of sorts. It is fed by – and leads to – more confusion and more doubts. Doubt breeds doubt in a seemingly never-ending vicious cycle.

But just as doubt fuels doubt, the opposite is equally true. Clarity fuels clarity.

There are ways to drain the force that fuels doubts, bleeding it until it is rendered lifeless. By acknowledging that you are in doubt and allowing yourself to challenge your own position (even when you may feel strongly about it), and by breaking down your choices into two antithetical options (before and after midnight) will allow God to come into the picture and illuminate your way so that you can achieve clarity and certainty.

## 11. Lesson from Basi L’Gani Chapter 3

This message is especially relevant as we approach Yud Shvat, the 63rd anniversary of the Previous Rebbe’s passing and the Rebbe’s assumption of leadership.

The last discourse of the Previous Rebbe, Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak Schneerson, was published for study on the very day that he passed away, Yud Shvat 63 years ago. This Chassidic discourse is titled Basi L’Gani, Come to my Garden (a verse in Song of Songs), and consists of twenty chapters. When Rabbi Yosef Yitzchak’s son-in-law, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson, assumed leadership of the movement, he began his first discourse with the same verse, and elucidated on the original discourse.

Every year hence, on this day, Yud Shevat, the Rebbe would focus, in consecutive order, on another one of the twenty chapters of the discourse, in 1952 – chapter two, 1953 – chapter three, concluding with chapter twenty in 1970. Then he began the order again. Based on this cycle, this year, 2013 (5773), corresponds to the 3rd chapter of Basi L’Gani.

The theme of this chapter teaches us about the power of every Jewish spirit to overcome our doubts, including the “foolishness” and “insanity” of our materially driven animal soul. In this chapter he declares that every single Jew, regardless of status and behavior, is fundamentally connected with God, and would never sever this connection were he to be aware. The fact that we are able to defy God’s will is due to “a spirit of folly” (or insanity)<sup>7</sup> that conceals from us the reality that this sin is harming our divine connection. We don’t feel its negative impact.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ayn odom oiver aveirah eloh im kein nichmas bo rucah shtus* – Talmud, Sotah 3a. See Tanya chapter 24.

And even under these blinding circumstance, which obscure our senses, we each have the power to access the divine “spark” within and actually transform the “spirit of insanity” to a “spirit of holy insanity” (*ruach shtus de'kedusha*), passionately committing over and beyond to good causes.

But to do this requires the humility of acknowledging our doubts, and embracing the divine mission with which we were each charged.

## 12. The Midnight Hour

A powerful midnight story poignantly captures this message:

Rabbi Feigelstock – who personally told this story as it happened with himself – was the director of Beth Rivkah, the Jewish girls’ school in Montreal, Canada. He relates that as some point his school was embroiled in financial challenges and battles, which ultimately took their toll and drained his strength and will, compromising his ability to run the organization. He sincerely felt that he could not continue fulfilling his responsibilities.

But he could not just resign without notifying the Rebbe. So he called New York to schedule an appointment to see the Rebbe as soon as possible. He was given a time the next day, and he immediately set out and traveled to 770 Eastern Parkway, in Brooklyn.

His appointment with the Rebbe was sometime after 12, between midnight and 1AM. Upon entering the Rebbe’s room he proceeded to lay out the problems, and his decision to resign for the benefit of the organization. He wanted to personally notify the Rebbe and ask him for his approval.

When the Rebbe asked him who would fill his position, Rabbi Feigelstock replied that he had no idea. All he knew was that he had to vacate his position.

What happened next? The way Rebbi Feigelstock told it with a smile, here is what happened:

The Rebbe looked at him intently and said (in Yiddish): “My father-in-law (the Previous Rebbe) said that the hour between 12 midnight and 1 is a “foolish hour” (*a nareshe sho’oh*). – [Bear in mind that this private audience (yechidus) took place during this hour]. – *Ober aza narishkeit [shtus] hob ich zich nischt me’sah’er geven*. But such foolishness [of you wanting to resign your position] I never could have imagined. Had I known that this was the purpose of your scheduling this appointment, I would never have granted it... Go back and do your job. You have all the powers and abilities that you need to overcome any challenge and doubt.”

### 13. Standing at the Crossroad of Doubt

And so, the next time you come to a crossroad in your life, before you make an important decision, even if you have a strong inclination which way to go, or you have a doubt whether you can accomplish it, rethink your position and review your options. Then, humbly acknowledge that you may have an approximate sense of which direction to take, but you are not sure. It is only “around midnight.”

And then wait for God to help you make the right choice, and empower you with the ability to implement it.

For God promises: “*Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt.*” God promises to eliminate all doubts and enlighten your path forward.

Sometimes the most certain thing of all is being uncertain, and allowing in a higher light to shine and illuminate your choices. Amen.