

BAAL SHEM TOV INSIGHTS

Issue 34: Bo

By Rabbi Simon Jacobson • Exclusive for Members

HOW TO DISPEL DOUBTS Discovering Clarity Amidst Confusion

SUMMARY

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 week's insight, the Baal Shem Tov teaches us a method to resolve doubts - based on one cryptic change Moses

makes in this week's Torah portion: Instead of repeating G-d's words that the tenth plague will take place exactly "at midnight," Moses says "around midnight"!

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Doubts

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Around Midnight

In this week's Torah chapter we read:

*Moses said [to Pharaoh]: This is what G-d says: "Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt. Every first-born in Egypt will die."*¹

Moses' words "around midnight" pose an obvious question, as the Talmud asks:² Why did Moses say "around midnight," only as an approximation? We cannot say that "around midnight" were G-d's words that Moses was simply repeating, because "is there then 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 explain that Moses approximated the time since a mortal cannot know the exact moment of midnight. But Moses was speaking the words of G-d, Who surely knows the precise midnight hour. G-d therefore surely said "at midnight" (not "around midnight"), as we later read:³ "it was [exactly] midnight" when the plague struck.

The Talmud explains,⁴ that Moses said "around midnight" (even though he heard from G-d that it would happen exactly at midnight), out of his concern lest Pharaoh's astrologers may miscalculate the time of midnight (leading them to think that midnight had come and

gone with no plague inflicted), leading them to accuse Moses of being a charlatan. He therefore deliberately changed the precise time he heard from G-d and instead said "around midnight."

But then why did Moses speak in the name of G-d: This is what G-d says: "Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt"?! Since he was changing G-d's precise time (exactly midnight), he should have not declared that "this is what G-d says"!

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Resolving Doubts

Explains the Baal Shem Tov: In this episode Moses offers us a fundamental lesson in life - how to resolve doubts both in our personal and work lives and in serving G-d.

Life is fraught with dilemmas. How does one know how to choose wisely when you have several choices and options before you? Often you may feel confident in taking a certain approach, but how can you be sure that this is the right path? Subjectivity, bias and self-interest can cloud our judgments and decisions. 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, and how do we choose when in doubt, or even when an option seems appealing but we're not sure?

Here is an essential rule: If one option appears particularly 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 that clouds your judgment. This is an excellent method (so writes the Baal HaToldos in explaining this approach) to ensure that you arrive at the best possible decision.⁵

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Piercing the Shadows

This is the deeper meaning in Moses' words: *This is what G-d 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 and be aware of your doubt (only “around midnight”).

The doubt is “around midnight,” it occurs at midnight, 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.⁶

This means, that when you are in doubt break down your options into two directions (“around midnight”) - either to proceed with a particular plan, or not to proceed, either to go to the right or to the left. And then, weigh all the arguments for each of the two options, and make sure to examine any subjective biases or self-interest that may slant our judgment toward one direction.

Says Moses (who is the level of daas, teaching us the knowledge of discretion and balance): When a person does this - diffuses and breaks his confusion into two options, “around midnight” - then G-d (Havaya, the middle path) says: “Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt” - into a person's confusion and limited awareness (“Mitzrayim” meaning narrowness and constriction) to enlighten him.

And then “every first-born in Egypt - every doubt that comes from the evil inclination (the “first born in Mitzrayim”) which thrives in confusion - will die” and be dispelled.

Draining the Energy of Doubt

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: There are ways to drain the life force that fuels doubts, bleeding it until it is rendered lifeless. By acknowledging that you are in doubt (you know it's "around midnight" but not exactly when), 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 ("around midnight") - this, "says G-d," allows Me to come and illuminate your way to achieve clarity and certainty.

So the next time you come to a cross-road in your life, before you make an important decision, even if you have strong inclination which way to go, re-think your position, review your options - 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 G-d promises: This is what G-d says: "Around midnight, I will go out in the midst of Egypt" - and eliminate all doubts and enlighten your path forward.

Sometimes the most certain thing of all is being uncertain, and allowing in a higher light that shines and illuminates our choices.

Sources: Ben Pores Yosef in the Introduction; Parshas Bo. Toldos Yaakov Yosev Parshas Mishpotim; Nasso; Shoftim.

FOOTNOTES

¹ 11:4-5.

² Berochos 3b.

³ 12:29.

⁴ Ibid 4a.

⁵ R' Yaakov Yosef writes that the Baal Shem said this in the name of the Ramban (in the Introduction to Ben Pores Yosef he writes that the Ramban told this to his son) . If anyone is familiar with the source of this Ramban, please let us know.

⁶ Midnight is also considered the mid-point between gevurah (the first half of night) and chesed (the second half).