

Parashat Bo dvar Torah

--Adam Levine (Beth El Synagogue, Durham, NC (2/1/20)

Like many people in my Facebook feed, I started off 2020 with an attempt to keep up with Daf Yomi, the worldwide daily page-a-day Talmud study whose 7.5 year cycle just restarted over last month. As with most Facebook-induced New Year's resolutions, I will be the first to admit that I haven't done such a good job keeping up with it, but on day 3 of the cycle, I came across an absolutely amazing passage that touches on this week's parashah, which I want to discuss.

The Talmud mentions a famous Midrash that King David would wake up in the middle of the night to write the psalms. The source for this is a verse in Psalm 119:

”חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה אֶקוּם לְהוֹדוֹת לָךְ עַל מִשְׁפָּטֵי צְדָקָךְ.”

“In the middle of the night I arise to give thanks for Your righteous laws.”

The Talmud then poses an interesting rhetorical question that will tie into our parashah:

וְדָוִד מִי הָיָה יָדַע פְּלִגָּא דְלֵילִיא אִימַת? הַשְּׁתָּא מִשֶּׁה רַבִּינוּ לָא הָוֵה יָדַע, דְּכַתִּיב ”כְּחֲצוֹת הַלַּיְלָה אֲנִי יוֹצֵא בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרַיִם.”

Did David know when it was midnight? Even Moses our teacher did not know! As it is written: (quoting from what Moses says to Pharaoh prior to the tenth plague): “Thus said the Lord: About midnight, I will go out into the midst of Egypt” (Exodus 11:4).

מַאי “כְּחֲצוֹת”? אִילִימָא דְאָמַר לֵיהּ קוּדְשָׁא בְּרִיךְ הוּא “כְּחֲצוֹת” — מִי אִיכָּא סְפִיקָא קַמִּי שְׁמִיָּא!? אֵלֶּא: דְּאָמַר לֵיהּ (לְמַחֲרָ) “בְּחֲצוֹת” (כִּי הַשְּׁתָּא), וְאֵתָּא אִיהוּ וְאָמַר “כְּחֲצוֹת”, אֲלֵמָּא: מִסְפָּקָא לֵיהּ, וְדָוִד הָוֵה יָדַע!?

What is “ka-chatzot”? (I promised in the email blurb that this would be a dvar Torah about one letter of the parashah - this is it! The question is, why isn't it ba-chatzot - about midnight rather than at midnight! The text elaborates:) If you say that this is precisely what God said (“kachatzot”) - could it possibly be that there is doubt before God? Rather, God said to Moses, “bachatzot,” at midnight, and when Moses came to Pharaoh, he changed it to “around midnight” because he was uncertain of the exact time. So how could David know the exact time!?

The presumption being that if Moses, the greatest prophet, didn't know how to determine exactly when midnight was, then surely David couldn't know.

דָּוִד, סִימְנָא הָוָה לֵיהּ, דְּאָמַר רַב אַחָא בַר בִּיזְנָא, אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמַעוֹן חֲסִידָא: כְּנֹר הָיָה תְּלוּי לְמַעְלָה מִמַּטָּתוֹ שֶׁל דָּוִד, וְכִינּוֹן שֶׁהִגִּיעַ חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה, בָּא רוּחַ צְפוֹנִית וְנוֹשְׁבֶת בּוֹ וּמְנַגֵּן מֵאֲלִיו, מִיַּד הָיָה עוֹמֵד וְעוֹסֵק בְּתוֹרָה עַד שֶׁעָלָה עֲמוּד הַשָּׁחַר.

David had a sign, as R. Acha bar Zimna said in the name of Rabbi Shimon Chasida: There was a lyre hanging over David's bed, and when midnight arrived, the north wind would blow and cause the lyre to play, and David would promptly get up and study Torah until dawn.

And, very cleverly, the Talmud provides a textual justification: a verse in Psalm 57 that says:

אָמַר רַב יִצְחָק בַּר אֲדָא, וְאָמַרִי לֵה אָמַר רַב יִצְחָק בְּרִיהַ דְּרַב אִידִי: מֵאֵי קָרָא "עוֹרָה כְּבוֹדֵי עוֹרָה הַיְנַבֵּל וְכְנֹר אֶעִירָה שָׁחַר".

"Awake, my glory; awake, harp and lyre; I will wake the dawn."

Let's just examine a few assumptions that are inherent in this discussion. My friend and teacher David Zvi Kalman, who's a scholar of Judaism and technology at the Hartman Institute in New York, wrote his dissertation on the evolution of Jewish attitudes toward timekeeping, and he points out a number of things related to this discussion. (Note of caution: If you're planning to try learning daf yomi, then reading your friends' dissertations every time you find something interesting is not a good way to get through it!)

The phrase חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה and its variants appear 6 times in the Bible: twice in today's parashah, once in Judges, ones in Ruth, and once in the verse from Psalms that I mentioned before. In all of those instances, the word can be read totally plausibly as "in the middle of the night" -- as in, "in the middle of the night, I got up and had a snack." I think we would all agree that that does not mean "at 12:00 am and 0 seconds, I got up and had a snack." There's a big difference between "middle of the night" and "midnight." However, in the Talmud, חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה comes to be the technical term for midnight, in part because of the influence of Roman civil law, in which midnight is considered the divider between one day and the next. For instance, the very first mishnah in Berachot (where this whole discussion is taking place) tells us that the evening Shema can be recited up until midnight - and similarly, noon (also chatzot) is used as a cut-off point for various other ritual rules. Through some creative anachronism, the rabbis are then bringing that understanding to the occurrences of חֲצוֹת לַיְלָה in both the Psalms quote and today's parashah.

Kalman points out one other crucial thing about midnight: it's incredibly hard to tell when it occurs! This is true for two reasons: First, unlike noon, which is marked by the sun being at its highest point in the sky, there's no easy way to tell from observation when it is midnight. And second, everyone is asleep then! (Apologies to any parents of young children in the room...) For legal purposes, Kalman argues, this is fine: when we're told that something has to be done by midnight, that effectively means it has to be done before you go to bed. But the fundamental assumptions are that chatzot halailah really means a specific moment in time AND that it is generally beyond human capabilities to know when it is. Such precision in timekeeping, in the Talmudic view, is only available to God. There are numerous other passages in the Talmud and Midrash that discuss this idea of God as timekeeper; for instance, a midrashic comment on the phrase "leyl shimurim," a night of watching, in this parashah says the timing of the Exodus was preordained down to a fraction of a second. And in this context, the whole point of the story of David's lyre is that he was only able to know midnight because of his supernatural alarm clock.

And now we come to what I think is the most amazing part of our text. The Talmud then brings a second opinion that totally flies in the face of what we've just said.

רַבִּי זֵירָא אָמַר: מֹשֶׁה לָּעוֹלָם הָיָה יָדַע, וְדָוִד נִמְיָ הָיָה יָדַע.

Rabbi Zeira said: Moses certainly knew when it was midnight, and David also knew. But now need to reconcile Rabbi Zeira's position with the other parts of the story that we've mentioned. The Gemara continues:

וְכִיּוֹן דְּדָוִד הָיָה יָדַע, כְּנֹר לָמָּה לִיָּהּ? לְאַתְעֹרִי מִשְׁנֵיתֶיהָ.

If David knew, then why did he need the lyre? He needed the lyre to wake him from his sleep.

וְכִיּוֹן דְּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה יָדַע, לָמָּה לִיָּהּ לְמִימַר "כְּחֻצוֹת"? — מֹשֶׁה קִסְבֵּר: שְׂמָא יִטְעוּ אֲצִטְגְּנִי פְרָעָה, וְיֹאמְרוּ "מֹשֶׁה בְּדָאֵי הוּא". דְּאָמַר מַר: לְמִד לְשׁוֹנְךָ לֹמַר "אֵינִי יוֹדַע", שְׂמָא תְּתַבְּדָה וְתֹאחֲז.

If Moses knew the precise moment of midnight, why did he say "about midnight"? Moses reasoned: Perhaps Pharaoh's astrologers will err [and believe midnight to be earlier], and they would say: "Moses is a liar." As it is said [a quote from elsewhere in the Mishnah]: Teach your tongue to say: I do not know, lest you become entangled in a web of deceit.

One of the joys of Talmud study is finding little gems like this in the middle of seemingly technical discussions. But let's unpack it a little bit.

According to Rabbi Zeira, there are at least two people in the world who are able to determine the exact moment of midnight, namely Moses and David. This doesn't contradict our general sense that midnight hard to determine - we're talking about Moses here! - and indeed, the text assumes that Pharaoh's astrologers are likely to make a mistake in determining the exact time, thus undermining the awesome demonstration of God's power that's coming with the tenth plague. Now, you could say: The plague is going to hit anyway, so who cares if Pharaoh's astrologers don't believe it up until the last second? But I think Rabbi Zeira's message here is in some sense a lesson about pedagogy: Even if you are the greatest expert in the world - even if you're Moses! - there are times when it is important to exercise some humility in the way that you present information to others, namely by hedging your bets and saying "I don't know." This is not just a plea for humility in general; what Rabbi Zeira is saying here is, by not taking the listener along for the ride, you may fundamentally undermine your credibility and thus your entire project. And even if you're totally in the right (like Moses with the time of the plague), it's not good enough to say "I told you so" after the fact; once you've lost the listener, you've lost them. Granted, I'm not expecting Moses to give Pharaoh's astrologers an impromptu lesson on determining midnight - but in any number of lower-stakes settings in our lives, this is a lesson that all of us can certainly learn from. Shabbat shalom.