



January 20, 2024



Parshas Bo

10th of Shevat 5784

The Secret of The Jewish Soul

When I was young, I would often play basketball on Sunday afternoons at the local Rochester JCC. One week, I was shooting around, when a group of around five or six non-Jewish teenagers walked in to play. I had no problem with it. We were very welcoming at the JCC. There was room for both of us. I played on my side of the court and they played on theirs. Even stranger, in perek 2, pasuk 23, it says that when Pharaoh died, the Jews cried out in pain. Why did Pharaoh's death prompt tears? Shouldn't they have celebrated? Perhaps a new king would replace the old Pharaoh and bring peace – why does Pharaoh's death lead to cries and pain from the Jews? They should have been thrilled!

After about five minutes, one of them yelled out, "Yo, Jew boy!"

I thought I must have misheard, so I ignored him.

Then he said it again, this time louder. "Yo, Jew boy!"

I remember thinking to myself, "You are calling *me* a Jew boy? This is the Jewish Community Center! I am as welcome here as you are, if not more so!" So again, I ignored him.

A few minutes later, he not only called out, "Yo, Jew boy," but he ran right in front of me and said, "Jew boy, you better get out of this gym or I'll make you get out of it!"

Being that I was 4'9" and twelve years old while he was 6'3" and nineteen, I determined that according to the laws of physics I should probably leave. And leave I did. But I remember thinking as I was walking out of that gym, dejected and rejected, "What is wrong with him? Why does he care? What is the big deal if I'm there? It bothers him that I wear a yarmulke? Why?"

I knew that I had done nothing to bother him. What, then, did he see in me that bothered him so much? What did he see in me that I didn't see in myself?

Why Do People Hate Us?

Let's ask a fundamental question. Why in the world did Pharaoh not let the Jews go? Did he truly need them as slaves? Egypt was arguably the largest and fiercest empire in world history. They could easily raid some nearby country and get other slaves. Why was he so murderously obsessed with holding onto the Jews?

And the question becomes even stronger as the makkos began to rain down on him. What was wrong with Pharaoh? Just let them go! The plagues were destroying his country! It almost seems like he would rather let his country fall apart than let the Jews go. Why? What was it about the Jews that bothered him so much? What did he see in us that drove him to the brink of insanity? True, Hashem hardened his heart, but what about the sixteen times that He did not harden Pharaoh's heart? What did Pharaoh see in us that we may not even see in ourselves?

And then, after we finally did break free of Egypt, we were wandering in the desert completely minding our own business, when out of nowhere Amalek attacked us. What was wrong with them? For what gain were they attacking us? We didn't even have a land to steal! We were a helpless nation in the desert. What did Amalek see in us that drove them crazy?

What did Nebuchadnezzar see in us that drove him mad?

What did Haman see in us that filled him with rage?

What did Antiochus see in us that made his blood boil?

What did Torquemada, and the inquisitionists, and Chmielnicki, and the Cossacks, and the Crusaders and the Czars and the Bolsheviks and Hitler see in us that drove them absolutely insane? That we eat gefilte fish and blow shofar? Is that what bothers them so much? Because we make good cardiologists and eat cholent? Is that why they wanted to kill every last man, woman and child?

Why do our enemies hate us with such vitriol? How does one explain the Jew's peculiarly unique ability to invoke the passionate hatred of virtually every significant country in world history? What is it about the Jew?

Born Confused

I heard the following idea from a speech Rabbi Jonathan Sacks gave at a convention in London. When the body arrives in this world, it enters with a body and a soul. The body comes out of the mother's womb, looks around, sees a barbeque going on outside, sees a liquor store down the street, sees the doctor's Lexus parked in the hospital parking lot, and instantly thinks to himself, I can get used to this!

The soul, on the other hand, emerges into this new, foreign world, looks around and is confused.

It is much like if you were to go to the fiftieth floor of the Empire State Building for a meeting with a bunch of executives, and upon walking in you find them all sitting cross-legged on the floor, slurping applesauce while playing with toy trucks! You would be utterly confused. You would think to yourself, "Um, don't you men have something a little better to do with your time than sit on the floor and play with toys?"

So, too, the soul looks around and thinks, "There has got to be something more. This can't be all there is; there is no way I left **that** world to come to this. There must be more to life. There must be a way to live meaningfully." But it does not know how. And so, it begins to get depressed and it begins to get sad and it begins to ache.

This ache is what leads people to do all sorts of interesting things. It is what leads people to travel to far-flung countries, searching for meaning. It is what leads people to read books about Plato and Greek mythology. It is what leads people to take upon themselves meditation or join cults like scientology. Man becomes possessed with a search for a way to stop the ache in the soul.

The Almighty's Algorithm

It is much like the internet. Before Google came along, the Internet was a mess. Searching for something online was a painful, laborious chore. Along came Google and created an algorithm enabling people to search for something online in a simple fashion. Similarly, before Amazon came along, buying something online was a disaster. You ordered a pair of boots; you got a blowtorch. It was a desert. A Jurassic park. Along came Amazon and created an algorithm enabling people to buy things online in a simplistic way.

So was the world before the Torah.

Before the Torah came along, the world was a mess – a complete and utter moral jungle. Nations battled to the death. Justice was a foreign concept. Honesty, peace and integrity were shunned. Immorality, brutality and physicality were idolized. Some nations felt that serving cows was how they were going to feel fulfilled. Others felt that thievery was a moral good. The better the thief, the better the man. Other nations felt that child sacrifice would be their method of choice in attaining spiritual enlightenment. In short, the world was a mess.

Came along the Torah and created an algorithm. *The* algorithm. The method and system to live a meaningful, spiritual, purposeful, holy life. A life with harmony and peace. A life with integrity and justice. A life with morality and ethics. The Torah introduced to the world the ultimate treasure map guaranteeing all its followers the most fulfilled life possible on this planet. This Torah gives the soul its nourishment. Torah is what gives the soul something real. Torah is what can finally remove that ache.

When Pharaoh and Amalek and Nebuchadnezzar and Haman and Antiochus and Torquemada, and the Inquisitionists, and Chmielnicki, and the Cossacks, and the Crusaders and the Czars and the Bolsheviks and Hitler see us, they don't just see yet another citizen of the world searching desperately like everyone else for a way to satisfy the soul. *They see someone who has figured out a way to satisfy it!* They see someone who lives for something meaningful. They see someone who radiates purity and holiness, who has beautiful, sweet children and a beautiful marriage. They see someone who is living life the way life is meant to be lived, with a soul that is well-nourished and happy. They see this and receive the ultimate dagger blow to their souls. Nothing aches the soul more than seeing a healthy Jew. Nothing bothers a starving soul more than seeing a happy Jew. Nothing reminds the soul of its emptiness more than the sight of the soul of a Jew.

Pharaoh was well aware that there was something different about these Jews. Something in them made his soul ache. Something about them made him feel empty inside. Never would he allow them to go out and develop their souls more. Never would he allow this dagger in his soul grow to rip it out entirely. No, they must stay. They must be worked into oblivion. They must be worked, whipped and terrorized until their souls crumbled, too.

Amalek was well aware that the Jews were days away from receiving the Torah. Amalek knew that the Jews with their Torah would be reminders for eternity that their souls are unfulfilled and starving. They knew this and tried to stop it before it was too late. Every great villain in history stared at the Jews and saw what a soul should look like, and was filled with rage. That is why they schemed to kill, expel, annihilate and terrorize the Jews into submission. Yet the Jews stood

strong. The Jews stood their ground. Year in, year out. Decade in, decade out. Century in, century out. For the Jew knows that his soul is his life. The Jew will never give it up.

I walked out of that JCC gym dejected and rejected for I thought I was inferior. Little did I know that we represent a soul that is alive. We represent a soul that is well nurtured and nourished. We exude holiness and harmony. We emit sparks of the Divine. We must walk with our heads held high, with our souls shining bright, for the Jewish soul is the crown jewel of humanity. Nobody will ever convince us otherwise.