

ROSH HASHANAH

תשפ"א

This year, looking back, has been an incredible year of total upheaval. If someone chooses, he can look at it all as a series of unrelated accidents. But for us, we know Hashem is sitting in judgment and dictates everything that happens in the world.

We all know that the global pandemic – the coronavirus – is the reason we are here in Nahariya and not in our beis midrash in Yerushalayim. We all know of the economic devastation that the virus has wrought all over the world. I have mentioned in previous shmuesen that there is a makkas arbeh – a locust plague of unprecedented proportions – going on in Africa now. The reports in the news are describing it as a locust plague of biblical proportions. Meaning, this is what they imagine the makkas arbeh looked like during yetzias mitzrayim. They predict that this plague will cause 25-30 million people to die of starvation because the locusts are destroying the crops. In other parts of the world, it has devastated crops and the news outlets describe it as of biblical proportions. Major unprecedented losses in Vietnam, China and India have turned daily life upside down.

Those who are aware of what's happening in the U.S. know of the absolute social collapse and the moral collapse that is going on. There are forest fires raging in the western coast of the U.S. A week ago, 225 square miles of earth had already been destroyed and there is no end in sight.

If you don't believe in Hashem, you will attribute this disaster to all kinds of natural forces. One, my "favorite" leftist politician from California (who claims to be a believing Catholic), blamed it on climate change. She used the phrase that "Mother Earth is angry" – as if nature is an independent power which can cause destruction. It is total kefiroh. It is Hashem Who is angry at us.

Economic devastation, social collapse, political instability and uncertainty – all these things were already decreed last year on Rosh Hashono by Hashem to shake up the world. We read in the brocho of Zichronos last year on Rosh Hashono that Hashem is deciding what is happening right now – which countries will experience peace and prosperity and which will experience devastation and starvation. On the one hand, Israel is starting to make peace with some minor Arab countries in the region. On the other hand, there is widespread economic devastation in Africa and Asia with millions predicted to die of plagues and hunger. It is not Mother Earth doing anything. It is only Hashem.

Hashem is shaking up the world. When the impact of the coronavirus started to really take off globally, I spoke about what Chazal describe as a mabbul of dever. Never since the mabbul of Noach have we experienced such world-wide disruption and upheaval. There have been regional epidemics claiming millions of lives, but this is a truly global event that we haven't seen in a long time.

The Rambam adds something to what we say in the brocho of Zichronos. In the nusach of the brocho we say there is a din on medinos and a din on yechidim. The Rambam says there is a global din on the whole world, a din on medinos, and a din on individuals.

Looking in retrospect, we can now truly see that one year ago on Rosh Hashono, there was a horrible decree passed on the entire world, on individual medinos, and on yechidim.

In the shmues I gave last week, I spoke about arvus – Klal Yisroel is one organic unit and each individual is responsible for everyone else. This concept of arvus does not extend outside Klal Yisroel. So we can ask, why does the decree on the rest of the world affect Klal Yisroel at all? If we aren't responsible for the nations of the world, why should their decree affect any Jew?

In fact, this logic prompted one foolish speaker to misinterpret a maamar Chazal and predict that coronavirus will not infect a single Jew in Eretz Yisroel. He said this early on when China and Italy were in crisis. We see now that Israel is one of the hardest hit globally in terms of rates of infection and we are now facing a similar crisis. We haven't been spared. So the din on the world generally has a ripple-effect on certain medinos. The decree on medinos then filters down to the yechidim who belong to that particular medinah.

Hashem has been shaking up the world. These are not normal times. In all the conversations I have had with people, I realize that they haven't grasped the gravity of the situation. They are thinking in personal terms and not in terms of the fact that Hashem is angry with the world and we need to respond accordingly.

We should reflect on the story of Lot. He left Avrohom Ovinu for Sdom, because he wanted to expand his wealth. He knew the people of Sdom were evil, but he convinced himself that he would remain a tzaddik – unaffected by the evil

environment surrounding him. He kept various customs of chessed that he picked up in Avrohom's house.

But then came the day when Hashem decreed Sdom must be destroyed. Why that day and not the one before or the one after? Chazal tell us that it was the very day Lot was appointed as the chief judge over Sdom. This development revealed that the only decent person of the city was now being entrusted with enforcing the corrupt, cruel and vicious laws of Sdom. To honestly enforce the corrupt and cruel laws of a decadent society leaves no option. It meant that there was no hope of survival and Sdom must be destroyed. Lot was trying to remain a decent person in a corrupt society but couldn't keep it up. He eventually blended into the society and agreed to take that position. Lot was only saved in the zchus of Avrohom Ovinu.

The malochim told Lot exactly this. He is being saved only because of the zchus of Avrohom and he has to leave immediately in order to survive. But Lot hesitates. Finally, they grab him and his family by force to pull them out. They are about to destroy the city and they say something very interesting. The angels warn Lot and his family not to look back at the destruction. If someone looks back, they too will be destroyed together with the city. Why? What's the connection?

If you are a part of a society, you naturally identify with it and feel you really belong to it. Looking back to Sdom means you still feel deeply connected with that society and sympathize with the people living there. The angels were trying to tell Lot and his family that they have to make a clean break. Fleeing Sdom and its destruction requires that you sever all your emotional ties to it. By looking back and feeling bad means you are demonstrating that you still have an affinity with Sdom, and you will share their fate.

So we see that Hashem judges entire societies, entire nations. Anyone who identifies with a certain society or a nation will be included in their decree.

This was a distinct possibility with Klal Yisroel in Egypt as well. Makkas Bechoros was a devastating plague. Every household suffered fatalities. Either the proper bechor or the eldest in the house died suddenly at midnight. Every family in all of Egypt had a tragedy and was in mourning. The angels in Heaven asked Hashem: why should the Jews be spared? Weren't they also idol worshippers? In response, Hashem instructed all the Jews who survived makkas choshech to publicly take a sheep and slaughter it in front of their former masters in order to renounce their connection to avodo zoro. Make sure you sever all connection to your former master's religion. Take the blood and paint it on your doorposts as a public rejection of the avodo zoro.

Hashem told them to perform bris miloh. This mitzvah had been neglected right after the generation of the Shevotim died. Klal Yisroel became eager to integrate into Egyptian society. It was the most advanced society in the ancient world. Morally corrupt and decadent, but so sophisticated and impressive! Bris miloh was the symbol on their bodies that they are different – that they do not belong to Egyptian culture and society – and they wanted to get rid of that symbol. Now Hashem says – take back the bris miloh which separates you from Egyptian society. Stay inside your house during the makkoh – so that you do not feel connected to Egypt and you will not be included in their decree.

This is how we survive throughout generations.

Hashem is telling us that the world we have been living in till now will not continue. We will never go back to what used to be. Radical changes are happening on a scale that we haven't seen in almost a century.

The Jewish world was changed beyond recognition during the ten years between 1938 and 1948. The dominant center of the Jewish world was violently uprooted from Europe and shifted to America and Israel. No-one dreamed that America would become a mokom Torah and that there would be a flowering Jewish state. No one could imagine any of this in 1938.

I read an account of a memoir of the Jews in Hungary towards the end of the war when the Nazis finally took over. The father of a Jewish household was imploring his family to start packing and to get ready to flee Hungary. The mother protested – I just ordered a new dining room set! She refused to acknowledge that her world had changed irrevocably. There was no more Hungary as she knew it. There was no going back to normalcy.

To the degree that we still identify with the world that is crumbling before our very eyes, the greater the chances are that we will be included in its terrifying din.

When we examine the western world and what it stands for, we see that it is built on a total denial of the fundamentals of Yiddishkeit. Not just the kefirah in Hashem and His Torah but in a deeper sense of what defines a human being and what is valuable in life. Human beings are not valued for their spiritual achievements, but for their economic productivity – for their capacity to generate wealth and experience pleasure and comfort. This is what is admired and pursued – a worship of the physical. I read a tourism book which advertised Tel Aviv to the non-Jewish world. They billed it as a temple to the body. Tel Aviv glorifies the body more than anywhere else in the world. They accept the most decadent lifestyles openly and proudly. They celebrate them. The United States is quickly losing all sense of morality and basic human decency. No yiras Elokim is found in that place.

To the degree that we identify with that world and share its goals, and its worship of money which has infiltrated our tzibbur, the more likely are we to be included in the din.

Imagine how many families will be making their own sukkas for the first time – since they cannot go to hotels this year due to the virus. How many families made a seder in their home last Pesach because it was the first time they were home and not in a hotel? They didn't know what to do! The materialism of our community was suddenly exposed and broken. We are living in a society which has been worshipping material success and denying spiritual values for a generation. Hashem is telling us: no more. It is going to end.

We have adopted deeply corrupt western values. America is rotting to the core. Portland is a city in total collapse because of the left-wing rioters and the local government which accommodates them. Recently, a right-wing protester showed up at one of the riots wearing a pro-Trump MAGA cap and he was shot in cold blood. Not only that, but when the news broke that he was killed, there was open cheering and celebration by other leftists and 'liberals'. Then I read an article by a professor of philosophy trying to give moral justification for all this. It was alright to kill because he was a fascist by wearing that cap.

The moral decay of America is now openly on display for all to see. If anyone still has any illusions that there is anything of value and morality in what you read in western literature and western thought, they are simply ignorant of the reality today. They have no values beyond a twisted form of materialism. It is time for us to realize that Hashem is shaking up the world and wants us to disconnect from this corrupt, decaying so-called civilization.

When I talked on Tisha B'av, I mentioned a frightening Chazal. The period surrounding shemittah has been consistently a time of historical radical change.

1917 was a shemittah year – the year the U.S. entered WWI, and 1918 was the year when it finished. In 1924 the U.S. government passed a bill which sealed the fate of all European Jewry. It seriously limited immigration from Europe and condemned the Jews living there to Hitler's rule.

1931-2 was the year of the Great Depression. 1938-39 was Kristallnacht and the Second World War. The atom bomb was dropped in 1945 during a shemittah year. The Six Day war in 1967 occurred motzai shemittah, as did the Yom Kippur war. We can go through history. These years have shaken up history. They are times that the world changes and how it changes depends on us.

There are times when Hashem shakes up the world. If we react appropriately, we can build on it and come closer to geuloh. But we have to hear the message.

This year was the first year I really understood the ten makkos as they were experienced by the Egyptians. I always wondered: How could the Egyptians go through makkoh after makkoh for an entire year without making any fundamental changes? How can they not hear the message Hashem is sending them loud and clear? But then I go through this pandemic where the entire world is turned completely up-side down, and I see people are still desperately trying to go about their lives as if everything is normal and nothing has changed! Rabbosai! The world is being shaken up. It is never going back to the world we grew up in.

As we approach the yom hadin, we need to realize that last year on Rosh Hashono, while we were saying the words aizu lacherev v'aizu l'ro'ov, Hashem was making the awesome gezeiros that took place this year. Economic downturns and recoveries are not going to happen because of our hishtadlus. There is a mageifoh which has taken a million lives. Devastation and economic collapse due to the virus, and the riots and looting are ongoing. Successful businessmen were reduced to poverty all over the US because of the riots. Who made that decision? The thugs and looters who threw the bricks through the storefront windows? No. It was decided last Rosh Hashono.

Hashem is showing us He is in charge and He doesn't like the way things are going. If we can disassociate ourselves from all the materialism, decadence, violence, and intellectual non-sense being employed to justify it all, then we will be far better off. Anyone who thinks you can learn any sense of morality or values in a university is making a gross mistake. If we get caught up in that world and identify with their materialism and their corrupt values, full of zhus, we put

ourselves in danger. Hashem is getting rid of that world.

When we make a cheshbon hanefesh in these days of Selichos, we should reflect on what our goals and values really are. You are developing yourselves now for what the rest of your life will look like. Do you really value what the Torah says and share its goals? Is that what's important to us or what western society values and considers important – only materialism with no spirituality? Which society do you really belong to?

Hashem is shaking up the world. It will never be the same.

The Egyptians received nine makkos. Moshe Rabbeinu told them exactly what was going to happen in advance. Each time, they woke up the next morning and continued life as usual. Then makkas bechoros came and they finally realized they have to get the Jews out before they all die. But then again, just three days later, they looked around and realized that there are no slaves to do their work for them and they start running after Klal Yisroel to get them back! Chazal ask: What did they use to chase them? All their animals died in makkas dever and borod!

Chazal explain that some Egyptians listened to the message of Moshe Rabbeinu and took his warning seriously. They put their animals in shelters to avoid death. They feared Hashem while all the rest let the message pass right by. But it was those very same Egyptians who now volunteered their animals to chase down Klal Yisroel at Yam Suf! What happened? Apparently, they only heard one kind of message – that their economy is in danger of collapse if they don't heed Moshe's warning. So when Klal Yisroel left Egypt and there were no more slaves to do the work, they responded in the exact same way – preserve our economy, chase down the Jews. They didn't hear the real message that Hashem is in charge of the world, until it was too late and everyone, together with all their wealth, was lost at Yam Suf.

We live in a world devoid of any morality and spiritual values. It is a world of twisted intellectualism and gross materialism. To the degree that we are a part of that world and base our decisions and goals on that world, we will be judged along with that world. This world is coming to an ultimate judgement – they are being decreed in a couple of days.

We just went through the anniversary of 9-11 which happened right before Rosh Hashono. People quoted pesukim in Yeshayahu about great towers being toppled. What was the reaction people had to the destruction of the Twin Towers? They built an even bigger Freedom tower! The lesson wasn't learned.

The best mussar sefer is a siddur and a machzor. The din on Rosh Hashono is real. It implies a detailed hashgocho protis. Hashem runs this world to the finest detail and because of that, He is making gezeiros in response to our mitzvos and our aveiros. He judges people on a number of levels – based on their actions as individuals, and based on which society they belong to. If we identify as American or British or South African or Israeli, we will be judged together with those medinos. If we want to be zoche in din, we have to identify as Jews and Jews only – with no affinity to any other culture or society.

Go through the machzor and especially the brocho of Zichronos – read Unesaneh Tokef. Hashem is sitting in din as we read these paragraphs and He is asking a simple question – which society do we belong to? Hashem's society with the Torah's values and the Torah's goals? Or do we belong to a different society with different goals and values?

This is the core question – especially at a time when the world is being shaken up and torn to pieces – changed irrevocably.

The most frightening thing is looking at what is happening in the world and seeing so many maamorei Chazal come to life right before our eyes. Chazal talk about a mabbul of dever, economic devastation and social collapse – and it is all happening at once! And it is happening around Erev Shemittah when historic changes typically take place.

Sometimes these three years around shemittah are ones of destruction, but they can be years of revival as well – like 1967. But we decide how far the yeshuoh will go depending on our reaction. We have to take these lessons seriously.

People like to talk about Moshiach. Chazal tell us that before Moshiach comes the destruction will be so great and people will be so fearful and desperate, that the only response will be to throw up our hands and say Hashem is the only One who can save us. But we have a way to go until we reach that point. I don't like to throw around Moshiach talk. Let's focus on our own personal moshiach and use this time in history correctly. When Hashem is showing His great anger against this world – and not some idiotic 'Mother Earth' – we have to take the message to heart and declare that we have no connection to that world. We only belong to Hashem and His Torah.

This is how we prepare for the yom hadin.