



The Midnight Phenomena

Judaism is fascinated with times. Many Mitzvos are set with specific time limits – and most of them are during the day. On the other hand, miracles seem to happen at night. There is a much deeper story here.

Mitzvot at Day

When do you feel more G-dly – during day or night?

In Judaism, there are many mitzvot that can only be observed during daylight hours; it is forbidden to do them at night.

Look at the Bris Milah. A bris is a mitzvah that must specifically be done during the day, as the Torah states, “On the eighth day,” which the Sage interpret as excluding night.

A Bar Mitzvah party, by contrast, can be held anytime. If you want to get an aliyah to the Torah, however, that can only be done during the day: synagogue Torah readings are only held during daylight hours—either in the morning or in the afternoon Minchah prayers. Thus, a modern-day Bar Mitzvah celebration, which revolves around the aliyah to the Torah, can only happen during the day.

How about a wedding? This is something that can happen even at night. Since getting married is so important, it makes no difference when you get married. Divorcing, G-d forbid—meaning the writing of the Jewish get divorce document—is only done during the day.

The same is true of many additional mitzvos: putting on tefillin is done only during the day; wearing tzitzis is only obligatory during daylight hours; blowing the shofar on Rosh Hashanah is specifically done by day and not by night; waving the lulav on Sukkos must be done exclusively during the day; and so on with many more mitzvos.

Miracles At Night

In contrast, Jewish history tells us of miracles that happened to our ancestors specifically at night. As the Midrash Tanchuma (Parshas Balak 8) comments on the verse “And G-d came to Bilam at night...”: “All the miracles that were done for the Jewish people to punish evildoers were done at night.”

One classic example is the miracle at the heart of the Jewish holiday of Purim. The Talmud tells us that the verse “That night, the king’s sleep fled him” (Megilas Esther 6:1) refers to “the full might of the miracle”— meaning that it was at that precise moment that the entire Purim saga began to turn in the Jews’ favor. The Red Sea too, split on the seventh night of Passover, and so on.

In this week’s Torah portion, we read about the most famous miracle of all: the death of the Egyptian first-born. This miracle didn’t randomly occur at night. Rather, G-d Himself instructed Moshe to tell the Pharaoh: “Thus says Hashem: ‘At the time of midnight, I shall go forth in the midst of Egypt.’” In other words, not at any given time throughout the night but rather, at the stroke of midnight.

But why was it so important for G-d to do this miracle at exactly midnight—and to emphasize it to the Pharaoh? G-d did not give the Pharaoh a day or date—He gave him a specific time, and at night, but not just anytime at night but at precisely midnight. Why?

A Time for Severity, a Time for Kindness

The Rebbe explains (Likutei Sichos Vol. 3 pg. 864) that night has two

parts: Sunset to midnight, and midnight to sunrise. Kabbalah teaches us that night's first half is dominated by the spiritual quality of severity, symbolized by the physical fact that the darkness increases from sunset onwards. But from midnight onwards, the spiritual quality of kindness dominates, symbolized by the physical fact that light increases, and darkness fades, from midnight onwards.

Severity's domination of night's first half is even seen in Jewish law. Halachah states that towards each day's end, illness intensifies for those who are sick. In a similar vein, it is customary not to recite Psalms from when the stars first come out until midnight. Why? Because night's first half is a time of severity and judgment—a time not appropriate to pray for mercy.

On the other hand, the entire picture changes once midnight passes. At midnight, the spiritual quality of kindness begins to shine, which is why the classic Tikkun Chatzos midnight prayer exists. Throughout history, the finest Jews rose at precisely midnight to seize those first moments of night's second half, when kindness begins to dominate, to pray for the coming of Moshiach and the redemption of our nation. This custom dates back to King David, who would rise from his bed each night at midnight to busy himself with songs and praises unto G-d.

The Stroke of Midnight

The Rebbe explains, therefore, that G-d picked midnight for the death of the firstborn because that would comprise severity for the Egyptians and kindness for the Jews—and it is at precisely midnight that these two spiritual qualities are united, which is precisely why it is then that one event can occur which is simultaneously good for the Jews and bad for the Egyptians.

But the biggest significance of Passover eve at midnight in Egypt was the 180-degree change of the situation. The same Pharaoh who was

not prepared to set the Jews free from Egypt under any circumstances and who threatened Moshe that if he returned to pressure him he would die, that same Pharaoh literally ran to locate Moshe and Aharon and beg them to “get up and leave my nation... and go serve Hashem.” Not only did he not hinder them, but fulfilled the verse, “with a mighty hand he shall send them forth and with a mighty hand he will banish them from his land.”

The same Pharaoh who denied the Jewish nation permission to go serve G-d for even three days changed in a single moment and pointed them in the direction of Mount Sinai: a change from one extreme to the other.

The Clock has Struck Midnight

Exile is compared to night. The Jewish People find themselves in one long night over the course of 2,000 years of exile. But when we look at it carefully, we see that the same people who oppressed the Jews at the beginning of our “night”—the Christians who spilled Jewish blood like water and caused endless calamities for hundreds of years—have transformed from one extreme to the other as the night ends. Today, and especially in the United States, they are the biggest supporters of the Jewish people.

We even see this in day-to-day life: I know of several Jewish individuals who began taking Torah classes at Chabad because non-Jews asked them Bible questions and they didn’t know how to respond—and this inspired them and drove them to start learning Torah.

I know of a certain African-American politician who began visiting the Rebbe’s Ohel, and when his Jewish aide was about to get married, he dragged him to the Ohel as well, so that he, too, could pray in honor of his upcoming wedding.

Is this not astounding? An African-American Christian, dragging a Jew

to the Ohel so that he could pray before his wedding?!

This, my friends, is the most significant change in the world to occur in Jewish history: non-Jews pushing Jews to be more Jewish, just like the Pharaoh pushed the Jews to Mt. Sinai. Today, just before the dawn of redemption, non-Jews are pushing Jews back to the Jewish fold.

But my friends: why should we wait for our wonderful neighbors and fellow citizens to push us? Let us begin today of our own accord, and may our newfound passion for our own faith finally bring about the dawn of a new day for all mankind, Jew and Gentile alike, with the coming of Moshiach, speedily in our days, amen.