

The Final Plague at Midnight: Witching Time and Time of Mercy
By Rabbi Eliyahu Kirsh

Throughout world literature we find a special air of mystery regarding the midnight hour. It is often known as the 'witching hour' as in Shakespeare's Hamlet. It was believed by many to be the time that the forces of the occult had the most power. After all, it signifies the epitome of darkness, secrecy and mystery. Because of the absence of light, it was felt something evil and threatening was hiding in the darkness. All types of folklore seemed to play upon these fears. And being that midnight is the time the sun is the farthest away from us and therefore the darkest part of the night, anything fearful about night was most potent at midnight.

Our Kabbalistic [mystical] literature reveals to us how the changes of day into night and the reverse play into the way Hashem runs the world. We are told in the Zohar [attributed to the Tanna Rabbi Shimon Bar Yochai] how every day as the sun goes down, Hashem's attribute of justice increases. Darkness has a connotation of judgment. This is true of every day except Shabbos when the increase of darkness indicates divine favor. This is because the peace and rest of Shabbos is felt and appreciated the most before it leaves us. On other days, in the absence of the aura of Shabbos, the growing darkness signifies the increase of things we are afraid of and among them are Hashem's judgments. This is one of the reasons why our evening service during the week begins with the passage of *Vehu Rachum*, 'And He is merciful'; we are appealing to Hashem not to be too rigid as he judges us for our conduct during the day. The epitome of this is midnight when the darkness and therefore the judgments reach their peak.

When we speak of midnight, we do not mean 12:00 A.M. Midnight for halachic and midrashic purposes means the exact middle of the time from sunset to sunrise. We divide that time into twelve equal parts which can be more or less than an hour, depending upon the time of the year. At the end of the sixth part or halachic hour is halachic midnight. This time the darkest and from here it starts getting light again. Our Kabbalistic literature explains to us how at this time Hashem's attribute of mercy then starts to dominate. It is known as the time of divine favor. This is the reason we are told that Dovid Hamelech arose every night at midnight to sing praises to Hashem which were later put together as Sefer Tehillim. This is also the reason some have a custom to recite *Tikun Chatzot*, special midnight prayers lamenting the destruction of the Bais Hamikdash. As Hashem's mercy is being awakened, it is the optimum time to cry over our exile. Symbolically, midnight represents the darkest that our exile can get and from here on the overall situation of all Jews will only improve.

Furthermore, when we get close to Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur we may begin saying the *selichos* [prayers for repentance] at this time, again because it is a time of mercy and Hashem will specially pay attention to our prayers. This concept of being a more merciful time continues till midday when the sun reaches the highest point in the sky and it is lightest. That is why those who do not say *selichos* at midnight can say them before shacharis when it is getting lighter. The important issue of the time for *selichos* is that immediately after midnight is the earliest time that of this divine favor.

Hashem specifically chose midnight to bring on the final plague to the final plague, the slaying of the first born, to Mitzrayim. If he would have brought it a moment sooner, the Egyptians could have claimed it was only magic and not Hashem's power. This is because magic and sorcery have their power only till midnight when Hashem's judgmental aspect is stronger. Rashi and other commentaries explain to us that is why When Moshe warned he stated that the plague will take place at about midnight. However when it happened, it was exactly at midnight. Once it is midnight and Hashem's mercy takes over, the power of all sorcery disappears. Mitzrayim was known for its mastery of magic and the occult and especially had to be shown that Hashem alone was the supreme power. Interestingly, the Cinderella fairy tale is based on this concept of all magical power ending at midnight. In the well known tale, the fairy godmother had power only till midnight. Whatever power it was that made the six white mice into fine white horses and the pumpkin into a coach, disappeared at midnight.

By Hashem slaying all of the first born Mitzriyim at exactly midnight, the time that the attribute of mercy starts to dominate, it was revealed that only he alone has power over the forces of nature and no one or nothing else has the same control. There could be no magic or sorcery that brought about this final plague. After all, Hashem created everything in nature and can change it at will. Precisely when we were being freed from Mitzrayim it had to be revealed to the world once and for all, that Hashem alone has complete control and nothing else, not even the most powerful forces in nature can be worshipped. For these forces are only Hashem's agents. This was necessary to be shown to both ourselves as well as the entire world at the time we became a nation. For this is our mission; the Jewish people's role is to proclaim Hashem's oneness and absolute power to the entire world. This was especially important at the very beginning of our nationhood when Hashem took us out of Mitzrayim.