

MAGGID - PART 6: THE EXODUS AND THE FOUR SONS

by Rabbi Yehudah Prero

Pesach commemorates the exodus of the nation of Israel from their slavery in Egypt. The exodus marks the birth of the nation of Israel; the people emerged from slavery to Pharaoh to become a nation, slaves only to G-d. The Medrash (Yalkut Shimoni 225) sheds some light on how the exodus impacted Pharaoh and his view of his former slaves.

"Vayehi b'shalach Pharaoh es ha'am..." "And it was when Pharaoh sent out the nation..." The Medrash homiletically interprets the word "Veyehi" as "Voy," a groan akin to "oy yey." Who was it that groaned when Pharaoh sent out the nation? It was Pharaoh himself, the Medrash states. The Medrash explains why Pharaoh groaned by means of a parable. There was a man who collected a large amount of sticks and twigs. Assuming that they were of little value, when he brought this merchandise to market, he sold his entire inventory to one purchaser for a very low price. The purchaser was a craftsman, an artisan. He fashioned the sticks and twigs into boxes, structures, and other assorted objects. When the seller saw these items fashioned from his twigs, he groaned. "If only I had known the true value of these sticks, I would never have rid myself of them for the price that I did!" Similarly, when Pharaoh observed the people of Israel enslaved in Egypt, he saw them as haulers of bricks and spreaders of cement. They were, in his opinion, mindless laborers. He did not recognize the people for what they were: a powerful, capable, intelligent nation. When Pharaoh set the people free, he suddenly saw something he had never seen before. He saw an organized nation, with a banner leading each tribe. He realized what he had in his country, and what he let go. When he realized the true worth, the enormous value of the people, the nation, he let go, he let out a groan.

In Mishlei (Proverbs), it is written (25:6) "Educate the child in the way he should go." Rabbeinu Yona explains this passage to mean that one has to accustom the child to proper character and refined actions in the fashion in which he will be most successful. The child has to be taught in the fashion that will best allow the child to comprehend what he is studying, and incorporate it into his life.

We find in the Hagadah that there are four sons who need to know about the exodus from Egypt: The Wise Son, the Wicked Son, the Simple Son, and the Son Who Does Not Know How To Ask. The Malbim explains that the four passages cited in the Hagadah, the responses to each of the sons, are all needed. Each differs from the other, because each son is different, and as Rabbeinu Yona explained, each child has to be educated in the way which best suits him. Each of these children, four very different children, must be responded to. They must learn about the exodus from Egypt.

Why is this lesson so important?

Pharaoh failed to realize that the people enslaved to him had enormous potential. Each person had a unique talent, a special ability, and a distinct personality, something to add to the value of the people as a whole. Only when he saw the nation together, acting together in concert, in splendor and glory with banners furled, did he realize that he did not just lose a bunch of slaves, but he lost a nation, a people. It was a huge loss. Pharaoh learned a lesson about recognizing potential, and it is this lesson we can not forget.

When the nation left Egypt, they realized their potential. They were able to develop into a nation, a process that slavery had stifled. Recognition and realization of one's potential is a lesson that emerges from the departure from Egypt. We teach this lesson to each child in the nation of Israel, in the way that the child best understands. In this way, regardless the intellect or relative capability of the child, the child will know that he or she is a member of a nation. The child will know that he or she is a unique part of a whole, who brings experiences to the table to add to the collective value of the nation. We are told that we must educate our children in the way that best suits them. We do this so that they will truly learn, so they will truly be educated, so they will reach the highest educational plateau within their grasp. They will reach their potential. We teach each of the four sons about the departure from Egypt so that they will learn the lesson that Pharaoh had to learn the hard way: the nation of Israel, in sum and especially in its parts, is a treasure to be valued.