

UNDERSTANDING INJUSTICE

by Rabbi Dovid Green

The Torah Scroll is the dearest possession of the Jewish nation. It is our "tree of life" through which we live eternally. There are directives regarding every detail of how it is written, what it is written on, how each parchment is sewn, and even the ink used. The integrity of the Torah Scroll has been carefully maintained for the past 33 centuries. Every "kosher" Torah is written by a scribe trained to write according to the laws and traditions which existed in the first Scroll which Moshe wrote and gave to the Jewish Nation. Every subsequent scroll is copied from a previously existing text, and carefully checked. Every nuance has been studied, and as much as we know of the depth of knowledge hidden therein, we haven't scratched the surface.

In our reading this week we encounter a form in the writing of the Torah which is very unusual. It is found in the "Song on the Sea". Below is a few lines of what a longer column would look like [monospaced font needed]:

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XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
                XXXXXX      XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX      XXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX  XXXXXXXXXXXXXXX                        XXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXX      XXXXX                                XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX
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The lines are like bricks which are staggered with each successive level. This is the way it has been written since the very first scroll. What is its significance? In general, one of the main ways that topics in Torah are divided from each other is by using spacing. At times, larger than usual spaces (I believe a minimum of space nine letters would occupy) are placed between words on the same line which end one topic and begin a new one. More pronounced divisions are created when a space begins before the end of one line in the scroll, and the new topic begins on the next line. In this case the space is open to the end of the line. Such a space is often used to begin an entirely new topic, as opposed to a space on the same line which divides two related topics. On a simple level this is one reason why the "Shirah", song, is written as it is. Each phrase stands as a statement unto itself, yet is inexorably related to the ones preceding it, and following it.

On a deeper level, spaces, or the lack thereof, are used to depict a scenario. We find that the beginning of the assimilation of the Jews in Egypt is with the death of the patriarch, Yaakov, in Parshas VaYechi. Between Parshas VaYechi and its preceding parsha there is no space. This is highly unusual. Rashi notes it and quotes the Talmud that the parsha is "closed" (meaning no space before

it begins) because "the eyes and hearts of the Children of Israel were closed with the trouble of the enslavement." Obviously, this means there was something which the Jews could see and feel before the enslavement began, which came to an end when Yaakov passed away. This loss constituted a turning point in the communal life of the Jewish People.

The Jewish Nation in those days was in exile, just as we are now. Exile in Torah terms is a state of being which is characterized by apparent injustice in the world. Evil rulers with self-serving priorities dominate. Societies are led astray by political and ideological movements (and even less-than ideological movements) which pretend to benefit them, but in reality benefit very few. G-d's providence hides itself. People question His existence. "How can there be a G-d? If He exists, how could He remain quiet?" Eyes and hearts are closed. Hopes are dashed, dreams are thwarted. When Yaakov and his sons passed away, the influence of the Egyptian society began to be felt in the Jewish world. It spiraled downward until it became outright subjugation. All that mattered to Yaakov and his family of seventy souls became dulled through the onslaught of foreign influences. Confusion gave way to pain, suffering, and servitude.

Then G-d sends the Ten Plagues. With each plague the Egyptians are afflicted, but the Jews are healed. The servitude comes to an end. Hopes are restored. The culmination of the experience comes at the Sea of Reeds. The oppressor is utterly defeated. G-d's providence is clear. There are no more doubts. Now, even the suffering is justified. The experience was purposeful.

This is what is conveyed by the spaces. The spaces express the now obvious providence of G-d in the Egyptian exile. Until now the answers were "closed", and out of reach. Now all is "open" and clear. Now the entire nation can point their finger and declare "this is my G-d." It is He who is behind the mask of events. We have been redeemed. We have not been disappointed.

Every week on a different level the sincere student of Torah experiences a taste of the "openings" between the affairs of our busy lives. That is, The Holy Sabbath. The critics of Sabbath observance say "your so restricted. You can't do this and you can't do that." The Sabbath observer takes a deep breath and says "I don't have to do this and that! Now I can turn to what matters in life. I can spend time with my family. I can study. I can stop and think." Most of us wouldn't do it otherwise. We get so involved in the process of reaching goals---mainly financial goals, that we forget that making a living is a means to an end, and not an end in itself. The Sabbath is the time that we can stop and remind ourselves why we are in this world; not to be a consumer. As we see, the spaces, or the openings, are the silence which shouts out so eloquently "there is something behind the mask!" May we all merit to hear the sounds of silence which cry out between the verses of the continuous "songs" of our lives.

Good Shabbos!

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