

BONDAGE OF THE HEBREWS: THE EGYPTIAN PERSPECTIVE

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Parashat Shmot

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Today's Learning:

Negaim 12:5-6

O.C. 153:21-154:1

Daf Yomi (Bavli): Menachot 103

Daf Yomi (Yerushalmi): Yevamot 66

When Moshe first appears before Pharaoh in this parashah, Pharaoh asks him, "Who is Hashem that I should listen to Him?" The prophet Yechezkel further tells us (Yechezkel 29:3) that Pharaoh used to say, "The Nile is mine, and I created myself." How does a person become so arrogant? Can anyone really believe that he created himself?

R' Shalom Mordechai Schwadron z"l (1913-1997; the "Yerushalmi Maggid") explains, quoting R' Saadiah Gaon z"l, that denial of G-d stems from throwing off the yoke of G-d. One who is depraved is not so because he does not believe in G-d; rather, he chooses not to believe in G-d because that denial frees him to be depraved. After all, how can any thinking person deny G-d's existence? Has anyone made a thorough scientific inquiry to prove that G-d does not exist?

This idea is found in Tehilim, writes R' Schwadron. There we read (14:1), "The depraved one says in his heart, 'There is no G-d'." This means: The person who is already depraved says "There is no G-d."

After he has chosen this lifestyle, he denies G-d.

Chazal interpret the first part of this verse, "The depraved one says in his heart," to mean, "The wicked are controlled by their hearts." The desires buried in their hearts control their every move. For example, there was no one in history who performed the mitzvah of honoring his father better than did Esav, yet after Yitzchak blessed Yaakov instead of Esav, the latter said (Bereishit 27:41), "May the days of mourning for my father draw near, and I will kill my brother Yaakov." Esav, who honored his father so perfectly, actually hoped for the death of his father, and all for material gain. Significantly, that verse in Bereishit opens, "And Esav said in his heart." Like all depraved people, he was controlled by the desires in his heart. (Ma'amar Avdei Ha'lev Ve'adonav printed in Da'at Torah, Orach Chaim Vol I.)

"He said to his people, 'Behold! The people, the Children of Israel, are more numerous and stronger than we [literally: 'from us']'." (1:9)

R' Shmuel di Ozeida z"l (16th century; author of Midrash Shmuel) explains that Pharaoh wanted to make his evil plot more palatable to the Egyptians. He said: "All these years, Yosef ruled over us and protected his people while they multiplied and grew stronger. Who is to blame for this? We are; it is 'from us'! Wouldn't we have shown sufficient gratitude to Yosef if we had just released him from jail, rather than appointing him to be the viceroy?! Didn't we strengthen the Jews by mourning Yaakov for 70 days?! Now, therefore, it is time to turn the tables." (*Derashot Rabbi Shmuel di Ozeida*)

"But the midwives feared G-d and they did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them; rather, they caused the boys to live." (1:17)

R' Chaim Elazar Shapira z"l (died 1937; the "Munkatcher Rebbe", also known as the "Minchas Elazar") explained this verse in light of the following story involving the early chassidic master, R' Elimelech of Lyzhensk z"l:

At some point late in the 18th century, the Austrian government decreed that beginning on the following January 1st, no man could marry until he had completed army service. It also was decreed that applicants for marriage licenses would have to pass a test of their proficiency in German. Obviously, these decrees were devastating for the Jewish community, and R' Elimelech prayed for hours on end that the decrees be revoked. Nevertheless, he sensed that his prayers had not been answered.

It was R' Elimelech's custom to sleep from 10 p.m. to midnight every night, and then to arise for Tikkun Chatztot, i.e., to cry over the destruction of the Bet Hamikdash. As he lay down to sleep on December 31st before the decree was to take effect, he realized with a heavy heart that G-d's Attribute of Strict Justice would soon be brought to bear against the Jewish people.

Meanwhile, elsewhere in town, several of R' Elimelech's disciples had raised money to marry an orphaned bride and groom, and they had scheduled the wedding ceremony to take place at midnight, the precise moment when such a ceremony would become illegal. Unaware of this, R' Elimelech awakened at midnight, as was his wont, and he immediately sensed that the Attribute of Strict Justice had retreated and had been replaced by the Attribute of Kindness. The Heavenly decrees which were manifested through the government's decrees had been rescinded!

R' Elimelech sent for his students to share the good news, but they were not in their lodgings. When, eventually, they were found dancing in the wedding hall, R' Elimelech understood that the disciples' determination to defy the decrees had succeeded where his holy prayers had failed. Their mitzvah of marrying two orphans precisely at the moment when the decree was to have taken effect "prevented" G-d from carrying out the decree.

Similarly, explains the Minchas Elazar, "the midwives . . . did not do as the king of Egypt had spoken to them; rather, they caused the boys to live." "As," i.e., "at the exact time," Pharaoh had said the decree to kill the newborn boys was to have taken effect, they did not obey. Rather, at that very hour, they defiantly caused the boys to live and even gave the boys milk and warm blankets. In this way, they prevented the decree from taking effect. (*Divrei Torah I, No. 33*)

"He said to his daughters, 'Then where is he? . . . Summon him and let him eat bread'." (2:20)

The gemara (Sanhedrin 103b) teaches as follows: "R' Yochanan said in the name of R' Yose ben Kisma: 'The mitzvah of feeding guests is so great that it distanced two families from the Jewish people [i.e., the nations of Amon and Moav, who refused to feed the Jews when they sojourned in the desert].' R' Yochanan himself said: 'It distances those who are close; brings close those who are distant; causes G-d to ignore the evil of the wicked; enables false prophets to experience true prophecy; and one who neglects it is considered like an intentional sinner'."

R' Eliyahu Lopian z"l (died 1970) observes that the nations of Amon and Moav began their history very close to the Jews, not only geographically, but because their founders were nephews of our Patriarch Avraham. Nevertheless, the bad trait which Amon and Moav demonstrated by refusing to feed the Jews near the end of their 40 years in the desert caused the Torah to prohibit the men of those nations to marry Jews (even if the men convert to Judaism). There simply is no place for such traits among the Jews. (This is the meaning of, "It distances those who are close.")

On the other hand, the nation of Midian was situated farther from Eretz Yisrael, but the descendants of Yitro the Midianite sat on the sanhedrin / high court. Why? All because Yitro fed Moshe Rabbenu, as described in the above verse. (This is the meaning of, "It brings close those who are distant.")

When the wicked feed guests, Hashem ignores their wickedness and defers their punishment. For example, there was a man named Michah [not the prophet Michah] who openly carried an idol with

him across the Yam Suf / Red Sea and who later established a temple to idolatry in Eretz Yisrael. Imagine the wickedness of this man! says R' Lopian. He witnessed the awesome miracles of the splitting of the Yam Suf, and yet he enticed others to practice idolatry! Why, therefore, asks the gemara, is Michah not listed among those who have no portion in the World to Come? Because his temple was situated at a crossroads where many hungry travelers passed, and he fed them.

Similarly we find in Melachim II that Hashem rewarded a false prophet with true prophecy because of his hospitality. How hard did the prophets work on their characters to achieve prophecy, and to this false prophet it came without preparation! Such is the power of feeding guests! (*Lev Eliyahu*)

"It was on the way, in the hotel, that Hashem encountered him and sought to kill him." (4:24)

Just one verse earlier, Hashem told Moshe that he was to tell Pharaoh, "Behold! I shall kill your firstborn," and here Hashem is ready to kill Moshe himself because he delayed a few minutes in circumcising his son! How could two crimes that are so different - Pharaoh's and Moshe's - both incur the death penalty?

R' Leib Chasman z"l explains that this is an example of how stringently Hashem judges the righteous. For the smallest infraction, even one barely discernible to ordinary men, a tzaddik incurs the death penalty. Why? Because, as Rashi writes in his commentary to Bereshit 1:1, ideally Hashem would operate the world with strict justice. Only because man could never exist that way did Hashem introduce the concept of mercy. Tzaddikim, however, are judged very strictly; in the long run, this is for their benefit, as it entitles them to greater reward as well. (*Ohr Yahel Vol. II*)

Letters from Our Sages

What follows is an excerpt from a famous letter, the "Iggeret Ha'Ramban." The letter's author was the Torah commentator and Talmudist, R' Moshe ben Nachman ("Ramban / Nachmanides"), who was born in Gerona, Spain in 1194 and died in Akko, Eretz Yisrael in 1270. This letter was written from Eretz Yisrael to Ramban's adult son, Nachman, in Catalina, Spain in Ramban's last years. (The complete letter has been reprinted many times, including in English.)

"Heed, my son, the discipline of your father, and do not forsake the teachings of your mother" [Mishlei 1:8]. Accustom yourself, always, to speak gently to all people at all times, and you will thus be saved from anger, which is a bad trait that causes people to sin. Our rabbis z"l taught [Nedarim 22a], "When one becomes angry, all manners of Gehinnom attain power over him, as it is written [Kohelet 11:10], 'Banish anger from your heart and remove evil from your flesh.' [The Gemara continues:] The evil referred to here refers to Gehinnom, as it is written [Mishlei 16:4], 'The wicked are destined for the day of evil.'

"Once you have distanced yourself from anger, the quality of humility will enter your heart. This

quality is the best of all good traits, as it is written [Mishlei 22:4], 'On the heels of humility comes the fear of Hashem.' . . .

"After you think about these ideas [i.e., those set out above plus others omitted here due to space constraints], you will stand in awe of your Creator and will be guarded against sin. With these traits, you will be happy with your lot . . .

"Read this letter once a week, not less, in order to fulfill it and to always walk with it after G-d, so that you will succeed in your ways and merit the World-to-Come, which is hidden away for the righteous. On any day on which you read this letter, Heaven shall answer your heart's desire, forever - Amen, Selah!

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