

# WHAT IF?

*by Shlomo Katz*

## Parshas Shemos

### What if?

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In this week's parashah, we read of the exile and slavery of Bnei Yisrael and of the very beginning of the redemption. In the Pesach Haggadah we say, "If G-d had not taken us out of there, then we and our sons and our descendants would be subjugated to Pharaoh in Egypt." The question is well known: Why do we assume that we would still be in Egypt thousands of years later when, throughout world history, kingdoms rise and kingdoms fall? Who is to say that we would not have left Egypt in time through natural means? Furthermore, what is the purpose of speculating; didn't G-d promise Avraham that we would be redeemed?

R' Yitzchak Yerucham Borodiansky shlita (Yeshivat Kol Torah in Yerushalayim) explains: We find that Yaakov was afraid as he prepared to meet Esav, notwithstanding G-d's promise to protect him. Our Sages explain that his fear of Esav was due to his fear that he might have sinned and lost G-d's protection. This teaches that no promise can be relied upon to counteract a sin, which is a rebellion against G-d. Similarly, once Bnei Yisrael sinned [either the brothers against Yosef, or their descendants by practicing idolatry in Egypt], G-d's promise was at risk of being voided.

Nevertheless, perhaps we might have been freed as history progressed? To answer this we need to understand that it was not a chance of history that Bnei Yisrael were slaves to Pharaoh. It was a manifestation of a Heavenly decree. Commenting on the verse (Devarim 4:34), "Has any god ever miraculously come to take for himself a nation from amidst a nation?" our Sages say, "Like a shepherd births a lamb from a ewe." This indicates how Bnei Yisrael were tied to Egypt by the decree of Heaven, and no historical event could have broken that bond if G-d had not brought about the Exodus. (Siach Yitzchak: Geulat Mitzrayim p.18)

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"And these are the names of the children of Yisrael who were coming to Egypt; with Yaakov . . ."

## (Shmot 1:1)

Why does the pasuk begin with "Yisrael" and continue with "Yaakov"? R' Yoel Herzog z"l (Paris, France; early 20th century; father of Israeli Chief Rabbi Yitzchak Halevi Herzog z"l) explains based on the similar wording in the verse in Parashat Vayigash which describes Yaakov's descent to Egypt. There we read (46:8), "Now these are the names of the children of Yisrael who were coming to Egypt -- Yaakov and his children." We also read there (verse 2): "G-d spoke to Yisrael in a night vision and He said, 'Yaakov, Yaakov'." Why the change from Yisrael to Yaakov?

The answer is that "Yisrael," the name given to our Patriarch after he defeated Esav's guardian angel, represents the fulfillment of Yitzchak's blessing that his son would rule over the other nations. When Yisrael/Yaakov was descending to Egypt, where his son was the viceroy to Pharaoh, our Patriarch and his children thought that he was going as "Yisrael." But Hashem appeared to him in a dream and informed him that this was not the case. Rather, his journey was the beginning of the exile that had been foretold to Avraham. Therefore, He called the Patriarch "Yaakov."

Perhaps Yaakov did not immediately tell his children about his dream. Therefore, they continued to believe that they were going to Egypt as the "Children of Yisrael." In reality, though, they went not with Yisrael, but with Yaakov. (Imrei Yoel)

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"Bnei Yisrael were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong--very, very much so; and the land became filled with them." (1:7)

R' Yosef ben Moshe Tirani z"l (Maharit; 1568-1639) writes: No one, not even Pharaoh, could deny that the growth rate of Bnei Yisrael was miraculous. Therefore, perhaps the verse (1:9), "He said to his people, 'Behold! the people, Bnei Yisrael, are more numerous and stronger mimenu'" [usually translated "more numerous and stronger than we"] should be translated, "more numerous and stronger from Him." If this is the correct translation, Maharit continues, then the next verse, "Let us outsmart lo" [usually translated "it," referring to Bnei Yisrael] perhaps should be translated, "Let us outsmart Him," again referring to G-d. Indeed, our Sages say that Pharaoh said, "Let us outsmart the Redeemer of Bnei Yisrael." That, of course, is none other than G-d. (Tzofnat Panei'ach)

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"During those many days, it happened that the king of Egypt died, and Bnei Yisrael groaned because of the work and they cried out. Their outcry because of the work went up to G-d." (2:23)

Why did they cry out now that Pharaoh died? R' Meir ibn Gabbai z"l (15th - 16th centuries) explains that it is common for a newly crowned king to grant a general amnesty to political prisoners. In this case, however, Pharaoh died and the new king did not grant amnesty to Bnei Yisrael.

Why did this fact draw Bnei Yisrael closer to G-d? Because the fact that they were not freed caused them to recognize that their slavery was not a natural phenomenon but rather a Divine decree. (Avodat Ha'kodesh Ch.34)

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

Rashi z"l explains: Because he had not circumcised his son Eliezer. The sage Rabbi Yossi said: "G-d forbid that this was so. Moshe was not remiss in this duty; rather, he thought, 'If I circumcise him and immediately proceed on the journey, the child's life will be in danger for three days. On the other hand, if I circumcise him and wait three days, the Holy One, blessed be He, has commanded me--Go return to Egypt!' Consequently, he obeyed His command, intending to circumcise the child as soon as the opportunity presented itself. Why, then, was he threatened with punishment? Because he busied himself with the affairs of the lodging place first."

During his visit to the United States in 1924, R' Avraham Yitzchak Hakohen Kook z"l (1865-1935; Ashkenazic Chief Rabbi of Eretz Yisrael) spoke at a brit milah and said as follows: There is a dispute among halachic authorities whether one should delay performing a mitzvah in order to beautify it (called "hiddur mitzvah") or whether one should perform the mitzvah at the first opportunity (called "zerizim makdimim") even though it will be less beautiful. [For example, if one has a minimally kosher etrog now but can obtain a beautiful etrog in the afternoon, should he say the blessing immediately or delay until later?] When Hashem told Moshe to be His agent to go to Pharaoh and bring about the Ten Plagues, Moshe refused. Why? Because Aharon was already in Egypt, and the Exodus would take place that much faster if Aharon led Bnei Yisrael out of Egypt! Hashem considered it a hiddur / beautification of the Exodus to have Moshe Rabbeinu as His agent, but Moshe argued that zerizim makdimim / performing the deed sooner takes precedence.

However, when Moshe arrived at the hotel and took time organizing his affairs before circumcising his son, he acted contrary to his earlier argument. For this, he deserved to be punished. This is why his wife Zipporah performed the circumcision using a sharp stone, the first object that came to hand. She did not even take the time to obtain a knife, because she wished to give the principle of zerizim makdimim / hurrying to perform the mitzvah precedence over hiddur mitzvah / beautifying the mitzvah. (Quoted in Brito L'hodi'am p.65)

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"Moshe returned to Hashem and said, 'My Master, why have You done evil to this people, why have You sent me? From the time I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your Name he did evil to this people, but You did not rescue Your people.'" (Shmot 5:22-23)

R' Shlomo Eliasoff z"l (a leading kabbalist in the early 20th century; grandfather of the contemporary halachic authority, R' Yosef Shalom Elyashiv) explains this verse as follows: Moshe's objection to becoming Hashem's emissary was based on his belief that Bnei Yisrael were not capable or worthy of receiving the great "light" that Hashem was planning to reveal. Moshe feared that they would first have to be purified through suffering, and he did not wish to be the emissary to bring about that suffering. In our verse, Moshe essentially argues that his fears have been confirmed. (Quoted in Haggadah Shel Pesach R' Elyashiv p.90)

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## Letters from Our Sages

The letter below was written by R' Yechezkel Levenstein z"l (1895-1974). Reb Chatzkel, as he is popularly known, was mashgiach ruchani of the Mir yeshiva in pre-war Poland and in Shanghai, China during World War II. After the Holocaust, he lived briefly in New York and then settled in Yerushalayim. In later years, he served as mashgiach ruchani of the Ponovezh Yeshiva in Bnei Brak. This letter is printed in Ohr Yechezkel - Michtavim, no. 7. Reb Chatzel was particularly renowned for mining the story of the Exodus for lessons in emunah / faith, as this letter demonstrates.

With the help of G-d, Sunday of Va'era, 5698 [1938], in Mir, Much blessing and peace to my dear friend . . . After inquiring of your welfare with love,

I received your valued letters in a timely fashion. Thank you for your efforts [regarding some unspecified matter]. "He will pay a person his deeds"--this really means that the deed itself is the reward, for, in truth, a person makes his own Olam Haba. The perfection that a person achieves [through good deeds] is Olam Haba, for the soul is a piece of the Divine, and the closer one brings himself to Hashem and the more one attaches himself to Him, so will his portion be greater. Every good deed that a person does naturally brings him closer to Him to bask in the light of His Shechinah. It follows, therefore, that a person makes his own reward when he does good deeds for others, which is emulating His ways [and thereby coming closer to Him]. Nevertheless, the recipient of the good deed must recognize what he has received and not be ungrateful.

In my opinion, a person can gain a great deal during these weeks, for with just a little bit of study of Parashat Shmot, one can increase his emunah so much.

We read (1:7), "Bnei Yisrael were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong--very, very much so; and the land became filled with them." Every expression here testifies that G-d acted toward us in a supernatural way.

We read (verse 9), "He [Pharaoh] said to his people, 'Behold! the people, Bnei Yisrael, are more numerous and stronger than we'." Has one ever heard of such a thing--in less than a century, a village of 70 people grows into a huge nation that the most powerful kingdom of ancient times fears? Pharaoh did not say that Bnei Yisrael were Egypt's equals; rather, they "are more numerous

and stronger than we"! [Ed. note: See page 2]

We then read (verse 12), "But as much as they would afflict it [the Jewish nation], so it would increase and so it would spread out." This is G-d's revenge against Pharaoh, as is the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu was raised by Pharaoh himself. Moreover, he had to pay Moshe's natural mother to nurse her own son. . . How great should our joy be to see such things.

My Hashem give you much pleasure and peace, and may we hear good tidings from you soon. Your friend, Yechezkel.

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The editors hope these brief 'snippets' will engender further study and discussion of Torah topics ('lehagdil Torah u'leha'adirah'), and your letters are appreciated. Web archives at **Torah.org** start with 5758 (1997) and may be retrieved from the [Hamaayan](#) page.

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