

# A LEARNING EXPERIENCE

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Rikki and Nat Lewin  
in memory of her mother,  
Rebbetzin Tzviah Ralbag Gordon a"h

R' Aharon Lewin z"l Hy"d (1879-1941; rabbi of Rzeszow, Poland) writes: Many have wondered, "Why did G-d do this to Yisrael, the offspring of his beloved Avraham--bringing them to Egypt and handing them over to cruel masters?" He suggests the following answers:

Hashem has chosen us from among all the nations to stand before Him, to serve Him, and to carry the banner of the Torah-- to enlighten the dark world, drive away the clouds of ignorance, and spread knowledge of Hashem everywhere. To make us fitting bearers of this mission, He wanted to implant in us good middot / character traits, such as empathy, mercy, compassion and pity. How strong such traits are in a person depends on his personal experiences; one who has never experienced suffering cannot feel the pain of a person who is down-trodden. In contrast, one who has been satiated with suffering and then has been relieved of it can understand the feelings of those who are less fortunate. And, he can appreciate his duty to help relieve the burdens of those who are still suffering.

This was the purpose of our slavery in Egypt, writes R' Lewin. And, he writes, this explains why that slavery and the Exodus are mentioned in connection with so many mitzvot that relate to inter-personal relationships, for example: "You shall not taunt or oppress a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt" (Shmot 22:20); "You shall rejoice before Hashem, your Elokim--you, your son, your daughter, your slave, your maidservant, the Levi who is in your cities, the proselyte, the orphan, and the widow who are among you . . . You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and you shall observe and perform these decrees (Devarim 16:11-12); and many more. (Ha'drash Ve'ha'iyun)

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***"Moshe was shepherding the sheep of Yitro, his father-in-law, the priest of Midian; he guided the flock far into [literally, 'after'] the Midbar / wilderness . . ." (3:1)***

R' Simcha Bunim Bonhart (1765–1827; Chassidic Rebbe of Peshischa/ Przysucha, Poland) observes: "After the Midbar"--i.e., the Hebrew letters after the letters that spell "Midbar" have the same Gematria as "Mashiach" (358). Specifically, after mem = nun = 50, after dalet = heh = 5, after bet = gimel = 3, and after reish = shin = 300. Thus, the verse is alluding to the fact that Moshe Rabbeinu wanted to guide the flock, the Jewish People, toward the speedy arrival of Mashiach. (Kol Simcha)

R' Avraham Tzvi Kluger shlita (Bet Shemesh, Israel) notes that these same letters (gimel, shin, nun, heh) are the letters on a Dreidel. Thus, the Dreidel alludes to Mashiach. When spinning a Dreidel on Chanukah, one should be aware that the small things we do in this world turn very big "wheels" in Heaven and ultimately can result in the coming of Mashiach. (Asichah B'chukecha: Bereishit p.450)

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***"Hashem said, 'I have indeed seen the affliction of My people that is in Egypt . . .'" (3:7)***

R' Chaim ibn Attar z"l (1696-1743; Morocco, Italy and Eretz Yisrael) asks: What is the purpose of the phrase, "that is in Egypt"? If Moshe did not know which nation Hashem meant by "My people," saying that they were in Egypt would not help, as there surely were other nations enslaved in Egypt also!

He explains: The Gemara (Shabbat 10b) teaches that one should never favor one of his children over the others, for the favoritism that Yaakov showed Yosef brought about the exile in Egypt.

Commentaries ask: Hadn't Hashem told Avraham three generations before the brothers sold Yosef that Avraham's descendants would be enslaved in a foreign land? One of the answers given is that Avraham was not told that the exile would be in Egypt. If Yosef's brothers had not sold him to Egypt, the exile could have been in a place where Bnei Yisrael would not have been treated so harshly. In this light, our verse can mean, "I have indeed seen the affliction of My people," and, I have seen "that is in Egypt," where the affliction is greater than it would have been somewhere else. Therefore, even though the 400 years that were foretold to Avraham are not over, I will redeem Bnei Yisrael.

Alternatively, the phrase, "that is in Egypt," can mean: Even though the 400 years are not over, I am aware that the impurity of Egypt may cause Bnei Yisrael to assimilate and be lost. Therefore, I will redeem them now. (Ohr Ha'Chaim)

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***"Hashem said to Moshe in Midian, 'Go, return to Egypt, for all the people who seek your life have died'." (4:19)***

Moshe needed to return to Egypt to save the Jewish People. Why, then, was it relevant that those who sought to take his life had died? R' Meir Simcha Hakohen z"l (1843-1926; rabbi of Dvinsk, Latvia; known as the "Ohr Samei'ach") answers: This proves that a person is not obligated to endanger his

life even if the entire Jewish People is counting on him.

R' Meir Simcha continues: We read (4:24), "It was on the way, in the lodging-place, that Hashem encountered him and sought to kill him (i.e., Moshe)." Our Sages explain that Moshe was liable for not circumcising his son the moment he reached the hotel. Why had Moshe not circumcised his son before leaving Midian? He reasoned, consistent with the above interpretation: "If I am not obligated to risk my own life to save the Jewish People, certainly I should not endanger my son's life by circumcising him immediately before traveling." And, Hashem apparently agreed with this. Moshe is faulted only for not circumcising his son the moment they settled down. (Meshech Chochmah)

R' Meir Dan Plotsky z"l (1866-1928; Poland) disagrees with the Ohr Samei'ach and writes that a person is obligated to endanger his life to save the Jewish People. As proof, he cites the fact that Pinchas endangered his life to kill Zimri, thus ending the plague that had stricken the nation (see Bemidbar ch.25).

The question arises, however: If Pinchas was only doing what he was obligated to do, why was he deserving of special reward? R' Plotsky answers: We know that saving lives takes precedence over all of the mitzvot. But, we might have thought that this is true only when the resulting salvation is "natural" [such as driving a seriously injured person to the hospital on Shabbat]. When Pinchas killed Zimri, he had no reason to think that he was directly saving lives, i.e., ending the plague that had struck Bnei Yisrael, as there was only a spiritual, not a natural, connection between the two. Thus, Hashem had to make a special announcement that Pinchas had done the right thing.

R' Plotsky adds, parenthetically: When two events have a cause-and-effect relationship that has no natural explanation, we call that a "segulah." He relates: A chassid once asked the Gerrer Rebbe known as the Sfas Emes (R' Yehuda Leib Alter z"l; 1847-1905) for a segulah for a sick relative. The Rebbe replied, "I don't know anything about segulot, except for the one mentioned in the Torah (Shmot 19:5), 'And now, if you listen well to Me and observe My covenant, you shall be to Me a segulah [in that context meaning: 'the most beloved treasure'] of all peoples, for the entire world is Mine'." (Kli Chemdah: Parashat Pinchas)

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## A Torah Tour of the Holy Land

***"I shall descend to rescue [the nation] from the hand of Egypt and to bring it up from that land to a good and spacious land, to a land flowing with milk and honey . . ." (3:8)***

R' Moshe ben Nachman z"l (Ramban; 1194-1270; Spain and Eretz Yisrael) writes: First, the Torah praises the Land as "good," meaning that its air is good for people and it is full of good things. It also is a "spacious" land, with many plains and open areas. Then the Torah states that it is a good land for raising sheep, with lots of pastureland. [This is alluded to by the repetition of "a land."] It has good water; therefore, the animals will produce good "milk." And, the land produces juicy, sweet fruit, so

that the entire Land “flows with honey” [an allusion to sweetness]. (Commentary on the Torah)

R' Toviah ben Eliezer z”l (10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries) writes:

“To a good land” – Good for the living and good for the deceased, as is written (Devarim 32:43), “His Land will atone for His people.”

“A spacious land” – The prophet Yirmiyah (3:19) call it, “Eretz Tzvi” [literally, “A cherished land”; however, “Tzvi” also means “deer” or “gazelle”]. Just as a Tzvi’s hide cannot contain its flesh [because the hide contracts when it is removed from the animal and seems to be too small for the animal it came off of], so Eretz Yisrael appears to be too small for all of its produce.

Alternatively, just as a Tzvi runs effortlessly, so Eretz Yisrael produces pleasing fruits effortlessly.

“Flowing with milk and honey” – Sheep will graze under fig trees and their milk will flow from them while honey flows from the figs, and the milk and honey will run together. (Midrash Lekach Tov)

R' David Ha'Adeni z”l (Yemen; 14<sup>th</sup> century) writes: “A spacious land” – It gives a person peace of mind [literally, “It widens a person’s heart”]. (Midrash Ha'gadol)