

RECLAIMING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH G-D

by Rabbi Aaron Gross

With the closing of the book of Beraishis/Genesis, one might assume we bade a final farewell to the patriarchs and matriarchs. The setting changes with the beginning of the book of Shemos/ Exodus, which forms this week's Torah portion. We enter a new era with an entirely new cast. "And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation." (Exodus 1:6) The face of the nation begins to change, and the people eventually will bear little resemblance to their pious, G-d fearing forbearers. The trials and tribulations of the Egyptian bondage leave their mark as the saga of our enslavement and persecution unfolds in the coming chapters. The telling signs of our spiritual deterioration become painfully clear. Even as Moses carries the Divine assurance of ultimate redemption, the Children of Israel display disinterest in his message. "And they did not hearken unto Moses out of impatience and out of cruel bondage." (Exodus 6:9) Surely by the time the exodus becomes a reality, our illustrious past will be a distant memory.

However, Nachmanides (R' Moshe ben Nachman, 1194-1270, of Gerona, Spain, one of the leading Torah scholars of the Middle Ages; successfully defended Judaism at the dramatic debate in Barcelona in 1263) found a connection between the two books. The lives of the patriarchs and matriarchs act as the blueprints for what befalls their descendents. Genesis is the microcosmic form of what will transpire in macrocosmic proportions for the entire Jewish nation in Exodus. Each patriarch endured his own exile; Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob met challenges presented by a variety of deterrents to their service to G-d.

The climax of Exodus, Nachmanides wrote, is the construction of the Mishkan (tabernacle). Even after the physical deliverance from Egypt, we were a nomadic slave people with no tangible vehicle for connecting with our Creator. Only after receiving the Torah at Sinai and assembling a sanctuary in which to capture the Sinaitic experience - a profound closeness with G-d - could we be considered a truly free people able to serve Him. At that time, the children of Israel returned to the spiritual stature of their ancestors in their relationship with the Almighty. Just as the patriarchs' and matriarchs' tents experienced the on going effects of being graced with His presence, so did the Jews achieve it on the national level upon building of the tabernacle.

The book of Exodus, then, is the story of our struggle to reclaim our relationship with our heavenly Father that we almost lost for eternity during our years in Egypt. Nachmanides' description of the events should inspire us in our attempts toward creating an environment within every Jewish home that enables the Divine Presence to dwell in our midst. However, in order to do this we must

understand: if the Jewish people in Egypt were on the brink of spiritual disaster, by what virtue were we deserving of Divine intervention on our behalf? What initiatives had we taken in the context of our relationship with the Almighty?

The Medrashic texts Exodus Rabbah (1:33), Leviticus Rabbah (32:5) and Song of Songs Rabbah (4:24) say that the Children of Israel were redeemed in the merit of four observances: they did not change their Jewish names; they did not adopt the language of the land, but continued speaking Hebrew; they did not betray a fellow Jew to the Egyptians; and they were not immoral. At first glance, this Medrash merely lists the merits for which G-d saw fit to reward us with redemption. A deeper look yields a more meaningful insight.

These four merits are designed to preserve national identity. By not changing names or language, we distinguish ourselves from the host nation. The last two merits attempted to maintain our national unity. Through these devices, our people prevented widespread assimilation, thereby paving the way for liberation. As long as we remained separate, deliverance could occur. The lesson for today is clear. With intermarriage and assimilation rates spiraling upwards, our battle must be fought on two fronts.

Jewish education from the early years on must emphasize the ways in which we can tangibly distinguish ourselves as Jews. Only by transmitting an appreciation of our religion, embodied in the Torah, will we retain our young people. This must be complemented by maintaining lifestyles that are inherently Jewish. Finally, we must reconfirm Jewish unity if we are to remain worthy of the calling, "So says the Lord: My son, My first born is Israel. Let my son go that he may serve Me." (Exodus 4:22-23)

Have a good Shabbos!

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