

NEVER AGAIN!

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Parshas Va'eira begins (after a short rebuke) with G-d's renewed promise to Moshe to redeem the Jewish nation from Egypt (Mitzrayim).

"Therefore, say to the Children of Israel, 'I am Hashem - and I shall remove you from beneath the burdens of Egypt, and I will rescue you from their labor, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgements. And I shall take you to Me as a nation, and I shall be a G-d to you. And you will know that I am Hashem, your G-d, Who takes removes you from beneath the burdens of Egypt. (6:6-7)"

These promises contain the "Four Expressions of Redemption" - "And I shall remove you... And I will rescue you... And I will redeem you... And I shall take you." (These four stages are the basis for the Rabbinic requirement of the Four Cups at the Pesach Seder.) The order of these four expressions represents the progressive removal of the Jews from the bondage of Egypt, each expression symbolizing an even greater stage of redemption and freedom. It therefore seems strange that, after completing the description of all four stages of redemption, the Torah concludes by returning to the first expression, "And you will know that I am Hashem, your G-d, Who takes you out from beneath the burdens of Egypt." Removal from the bondage of Egypt was the first stage of redemption, yet it seems that we will not "know" (i.e. truly understand) that stage until we have undergone all the other stages. Why can't the first stage of redemption be understood independently and immediately?

The word the Torah uses for "burdens" is *sivlos*, from the root *s-v-l*, to bear. As long as the Bnei Yisrael were still in Egypt, the Chiddushei HaRim explains, they were able to "bear" the servitude - i.e. they found ways to cope and come to terms with their slavery. Their redemption was not only the removal of the physical shackles of bondage, it was also the emancipation from the slave-mentality through which they had accustomed themselves to bearing the burden of servitude. Accordingly, the verse means: "And I shall remove you from 'bearing the bondage' of Mitzrayim."

In Parshas Beshalach we read (13:17), "And it happened, when Pharaoh sent out the people, that Hashem did not lead them by way of the land of Plishtim, because it was near. For Hashem said, 'Perhaps the people will reconsider... and they will return to Egypt.'" Of all things to worry about, why the concern that they would consider returning to Egypt? Wasn't 210 years of exile, and 116 years of slavery (see Rashi 6:16 and Mizrachi *ibid.*) enough?

The human condition is such that we do not, as a rule, like to live in eternal suffering and distress.

Instead, we learn to bear that which is bad. More than simply "coming to terms" with pain and hardship, we often succeed in rationalizing that things are really not so bad after all - that in essence there is nothing wrong; this is how things are meant to be.

The ability to cope is the proverbial two-edged sword. On the one hand, it allows us to live without having to experience the constant pain of suffering. On the other hand, it can, at times, blind us to the extent of our pain, and to the need to do everything we can to remove ourselves from it.

The concern that the Jews might consider returning to Egypt, the nation which had so cruelly enslaved them for over a century, was not unfounded. Indeed, more than once we find in the Torah the expression of their desire to return (see Bamidbar/Numbers 11:5 "We remember the fish that we ate in Egypt for free!" Ibid. 14:4, "And they said to one another, 'Let us appoint a head, and return to Mitzrayim!"). It was bad, but they had learned to cope.

Perhaps, then, we could conjecture that while physical redemption from bondage can be accomplished in an instant, the removal of its psychological "chains" is a much more gradual process. While the initial experience of freedom felt good, they did not yet fully appreciate how bad it had been. It was only after all four stages of redemption were complete - indeed, only after "And I shall take you to Me as a nation," that they could no longer bear the bondage. Only then could they truly say "Never again!"

In a more general sense, the redemption from Egyptian bondage represents the individual in his struggle to remove from himself the shackles of his own failures and shortcomings. To some extent, we all have the ability to discern right from wrong. We may, at times, recognize that we have failed and even desire to change. But to some extent we have also learned to cope with our own badness. We have rationalized and justified - we have learned to "bear the burden."

This is part of what makes teshuvah (repentance) so difficult. One who truly desires to change, to overcome his faults and release himself from the chains of his own failures and weaknesses, must struggle not only to do good, but also to recognize the bad for what it truly is - to admit to himself the depths to which he has fallen and the extent of his sin. Teshuvah begins with the desire to do good, but its final stage, its completion, is to fully appreciate just how bad things were. Only then can one truly say, clearly and definitively, "Never again!"

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