

EVERY THROES HAS ITS THORN

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

There is much discussion with regards to the "new king" of Egypt who comes to power at the beginning of parshas Shemos - was he a new king, or the same old Pharaoh with new laws and decrees designed to break the Jewish nation? Regardless of whether we take his "newness" literally or figuratively, writes Rashi, one thing is for sure: By subjugating the Jewish people, he made the conscious decision to ignore Yosef and the tremendous contribution he had made to Egyptian society. As the Torah writes (1:8), "A new king arose in Egypt, who did not know of Joseph."

Without getting into the calculations, the initiation of the Jews into slavery did not begin for at least 23 years after Yosef's death - until Levi, the most long-living of all the tribes, died. Even then, they were not instantly plunged into full-fledged slavery; the subjugation began moderately and slowly developed into the bondage and back-breaking labour that we commemorate on the night of the Pesach Seder. Considering that slavery in those times was not treated with the same disdain that it is today, how long would we have expected the Egyptians to give the Jews "the royal treatment" based on the fact that many years ago, Yosef saved the day? If someone's grandfather saved your grandfather's life many years ago, would we expect your family to give their family preferential treatment for the rest of time? So what does the Torah mean when it expresses that the new king "forgot about Yosef?"

Hashem appears to Moshe from a burning bush. Why a bush? Chazal, our Sages, say that Hashem suffers together with the Jews (Shemos Rabbah 2:5). When we're in pain - Hashem's in pain. And when we're in exile - Hashem, so to speak, goes into exile with us. Hashem appeared to Moshe from the lowly thornbush, burning in a raging fire, as if to say: I, too, am lowered by the Egyptian subordination; I, too, am seething with pain.

Suppose a father were to punish his son, giving him the one-over with the proverbial belt. We all know the, "this hurts me more than it hurts you - son" cliché. Well, suppose the father were to actually give himself one smack with the belt for each one he gave his son. In what way would this soothe the son's pain? Or what if he did so privately - out of his son's view - and later claimed to his son that, by the way, he too had received lashes. What comfort would this offer him?

We believe Hashem suffers with us. Yet it is not something most of us see, or even feel. So what's the point of Hashem "joining us in our suffering," if it fails to console us or lessen the pain?

Perhaps Hashem's suffering with us is not meant as a means of consolation or solace, but rather as

an opportunity for prayer so powerful it can not be rejected. It is known that prayer is a key element of redemption. "For I have heard the cries of the Jewish nation (6:5)." "And their cries ascended to G-d from their labour (2:23)." While prayer is always a powerful tool, when praying not for oneself but for another, it becomes potent.

"Anyone who prays for his fellow, even though he himself is in need, he will receive his own salvation first (Bava Kamma 92a)." *Sefarim* write that this concept can also be applied to our prayers for redemption. If, instead of bemoaning our own troubles and *tzures*, we cry out over the fact that Hashem - the Almighty Himself - suffers silently along with us, then our prayers are far more powerful and likely to be answered. Hashem's placing Himself in exile together with us is thus a tremendous kindness, as it guarantees us the opportunity to bring about redemption through our prayers - which, when focused on the needs of "Another," are guaranteed success.

Based on this concept, Noam Elimelech has a novel understanding of the verse quoted above, "And their cries ascended to G-d from their labour." Simply, the Torah means that the cries they cried out from their labour and subjugation ascended to Hashem. Yet why does the Torah bother telling us that their cries were "from their labour?" We all know why they were crying!

The Jews of Egypt knew this secret: If you pray for yourselves, perhaps your prayers will be answered, and perhaps they won't. But if your prayers are focused on the suffering of "Another" - Hashem, Who suffers along with us in exile - then you are guaranteed to be answered. Their cries ascended to G-d - i.e. the focus of their prayers was, to the extent we can express it, on Hashem's suffering; from their labour - far more than they were focused on their own labour and slavery.

The Gemara (Gittin 7a) says, "Anyone who takes away the livelihood of another [by stealing his customers, etc.], the One Who dwells in the thornbush will take up his case." This is the only time in Shas that Chazal refer to Hashem as "the One Who dwells in the thornbush." Why here? When Hashem suffers with us, He is metaphorically compared to One Who dwells in a thornbush. If you cause another Jew pain, by stealing his means of earning a living, you are causing Hashem to suffer too. Hashem, Who dwelled in a bush while the Jews suffered in Egypt, will come to his rescue. [Be'er Moshe]

In parshas Ve'zos Ha-bracha, the last parsha of the Torah, when Moshe offers his final blessings for the Jewish nation, he blesses Yosef saying, "Blessed by Hashem is his land... with the bounty of the land and its fullness, and by the favour of He Who rested upon the thornbush (Devarim 33:13-16)." Yosef suffered more than all his brothers, yet his redemption and ultimate rise to greatness also outdid them all. Because he suffered, he merited the favour of He Who rested upon the thornbush, and suffered silently along with him.

Yosef's redemption and ascent to greatness, say Chazal, is a microcosm of the ultimate redemption and ascent of our nation. What occurred to Yosef as an individual, later happened on a national scale with their redemption from Egypt, and will again take place with the coming of Mashiach and the

Final Redemption.

Perhaps this was what Pharaoh forgot: A new king arose in Egypt who did not know of Yosef - he forgot that Yosef represents "the favour of He Who dwells in the thornbush," and that by subjugating the Jews, he was, so to speak, subjugating the Almighty as well. "For so says Hashem, Master of Legions: After [the] glory [temporarily granted the nations], He will send me to the nations who rob you; for whoever touches you, touches the pupil of His own eye (Zechariah 2:12)." By forgetting Yosef, and what he represents, Pharaoh had sealed his own fate.

Prayer is called "labour of the heart (Ta'anis 2a)." To cry out for one's own needs and distress is not laborious - it is in fact a natural reaction. However, to forsake our own needs, and focus instead on the suffering of Hashem, is truly a "labour of love." While difficult, it is the only prayer which is guaranteed success.

Have a good Shabbos.

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