

# EARLY EMANCIPATION AND SOUR GRAPES

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

*What does the wicked son say? "What is this service to you?" "To you," and not to him. He has excluded himself, demonstrating his heresy. You too - set his teeth on edge (ha'keh es shinav) - and say to him, "It is because of this that Hashem did this to me when I left Egypt." "To me," and not to him; were he there, he would not have been redeemed. [Haggada Shel Pesach]*

What exactly does it mean that we "set the teeth of the wicked son on edge" with our answer? (Ha'keh means to dull or blunt; it also refers to teeth being set on edge by a pungent or tart taste, such as that of unripe fruits.) Also: Why do we consider this son an apostate just because he excluded himself from the service? After all, he has not denounced Hashem. And if he is indeed wicked, why should it bother him if we tell him he would have been excluded from the redemption? Wouldn't it have been better for the wicked son to stay in Egypt, where he could enjoy a different sort of freedom - freedom from Torah and mitzvos?

R' Benzion zt"l, grandfather of the present Bobover Rebbe shlita, offers the following approach to answer these questions (Kedushas Tzion volume 2):

The Egyptian exile had been foretold to Avraham at the famous Bris Bein Ha-besarim (Covenant Between the Pieces - Bereishis/Genesis 15:13). "And [Hashem] said to Avram: You must surely know that your offspring will sojourn in a foreign land; they will enslave them and hurt them for four-hundred years." Ultimately, the Egyptians went "above and beyond the call of duty" in their fulfillment of "they will enslave and hurt them." - "They embittered their lives with strenuous work (Shemos/Exodus 1:14)," they killed their children and broke their spirits with impossible demands. They cast their dead children into the Nile, and bathed in their blood.

If it wasn't part of the decree, why did Hashem allow it to happen?

Mefarshim (commentaries) explain that the original decree was for an exile of 400 years. In the end, the Jews were in Egypt for only 210 years. It was the intensity of their subjugation that facilitated their premature emancipation.

Their answer, though, requires explanation. The Gemara says (Avodah Zara 4a) that one punishes a loved one a little at a time; upon an enemy one brings to bear the full brunt of his misdeed in one fell swoop. If so, would it not have been preferable for them to stay in Egypt for the duration, thereby lessening the extent of their suffering?

Were this possible, it would indeed have been better. Hashem did not rush the redemption in order to punish them quicker; He did so because the Jews in Egypt had descended so quickly and definitively into the bowels of pagan worship that were they to have stayed any longer - even a moment - they would have traversed a spiritual point of no return. (This, says the holy Arizal, is the meaning of (Shemos 12:39), "For they were driven from Egypt, and they could not delay.") There was no choice but to hasten their redemption, with the unfortunate repercussion of increased enslavement and torture.

While the pill of increased subjugation is a bitter one to swallow, and from a material standpoint it is easier to bear a longer period of lesser torture, delaying the redemption would have put our very souls at risk of oblivion, and our forefathers willingly accepted the "tightening of the noose" in exchange for its spiritual advantages.

This is only true of the faithful Jew. The wicked soul, on the other hand, was none too happy to have his slavery increased in exchange for spiritual redemption, in which he had no interest. He thus asks: What is this work to you? - true, our grandfather Avraham was told there would be slavery, but no one ever said anything about back-breaking work and death warrants! We would like to answer him with the truth: Indeed, things have gone beyond their original intent, but it is for our own good, so that we can make an early departure, thereby preventing us from falling into the abyss of spiritual oblivion. But alas, this answer hardly satisfies him. To you, but not to him - he would far rather lessen the load of slavery, even at the risk of losing our ability to receive the Torah. Indeed, he would rather not receive the Torah, which will only further limit his ability to enjoy the pleasures of material life. By giving preference to an extended exile/lesser yoke rather than spiritual redemption, he demonstrates his own heresy.

The Gemara (Berachos 5a) says that affliction is only effective if one accepts it lovingly. The wicked son, by complaining about the additional suffering in exchange for less years, and refusing to accept affliction, does himself a tremendous disservice. Not only does he demonstrate his misplaced priorities; he also revokes the ability of the additional suffering to shorten his enslavement! Were he there - we tell him - he would not have been redeemed - for there would still be time left to work.

Now, according to the wicked son's own crooked logic, the Jews left Egypt before the appointed time. He does not accept the fact that the over-affliction shortened the time, for in his eyes it was not accepted willingly.

The Gemara (Sanhedrin 107a) refers to someone taking something before it's meant to be had as "eating unripe grapes." And, "One who eats unripe grapes, his teeth are set on edge (see Yirmiyahu/Jeremiah 31:29 - ti'khena shin'av)". By claiming our forefathers left Egypt before their time had come, he claims they "ate unripe grapes." We respond in part by "setting his teeth on edge," telling him that they deserved to leave early, for they accepted Hashem's decrees with faith, trust, and love. He, on the other hand, would still be there.

It is not without substantiation that we can claim that our ancestors have suffered longer and more bitterly than our forefathers in Egypt over the past 2,000 years of exile, abuse, and persecution. Throughout, Jews have trusted, remained faithful to Hashem, and accepted their lot with love. No doubt our ultimate redemption, may it come speedily in our days, lies in their merit not far off.

Wishing our readers a good Shabbos and a Chag Kasher Ve'sameach. Text Copyright © 2004 by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann and **Torah.org**