

LESSONS OF A LIQUIDATION SALE

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

Towards the end of parshas Vayigash we read about Yosef's management of the Egyptian economy during the devastating seven-year famine. As the famine intensified, the Egyptian people offered more and more of their own possessions - ultimately offering themselves - in exchange for food. At one stage, they retained ownership of their land, but sold their cattle. "They brought their livestock to Yosef, and Yosef gave them bread in exchange for the horses, for the stocks of sheep and cattle, and the donkeys; he provided them with bread that year in exchange for all their livestock (47:17)."

Among the animals listed in this verse, the sheep are perhaps the most noteworthy. As we know from parshas Va'eira (Shemos/Exodus 8:22) and countless Midrashim, Egyptians worshipped sheep. Yet when famine struck, food prices soared, and the Egyptians peasantry lost everything but their animals, even these deities became mere barter-fodder used to purchase grain. Some mefarshim (commentaries) suggest that it is for this reason alone the Torah went through the trouble of listing the types of animals the Egyptians exchanged for grain - something that at first glance is of little impart to us - to emphasize the rapid deterioration of sheep's status from superhuman creatures to dollar bills. [Divrei Shir]

Still, though, of what importance is it to us whether or not the Egyptians were quick to dump their gods when the going got tough? Is this merely an exercise in self-gratification, elevating ourselves and our beliefs by emphasizing how little we have in common with our pagan neighbours?

Perhaps not. When the Torah warns countless times against avodah-zara (pagan worship), it is instructing us to understand its underpinnings, and to ensure our own relationship with Hashem is distant and divorced from anything remotely similar. Therein lies the lesson.

Little Moishie was walking along the railroad tracks when suddenly he got his foot caught under one of the railroad ties. He tried to get it out, but it was jammed tight. As he struggled to free his foot, he suddenly heard a noise. To his horror, he turned and saw a train approaching. Panic-stricken he started to pray, "Hashem, please get my foot out of these tracks. I'll never be bad again. I'll always do what my parents say. I won't bother my brothers and sisters anymore. And I'll learn Torah whenever I have free time. Please Hashem just get me out of this one."

Nothing happened; his foot was wedged in. In fact it seemed that the more he struggled, the tighter it got. He looked up, and saw the train getting closer! Again he prayed. "Hashem, please get my foot out - I'll make my berachos loud and clear, and I'll go see my Bubby on the way home from Yeshiva

every day."

Still nothing; his foot was wedged tight. The train was just seconds away.

Little Moishie struggled frantically; the train's horn blared. He tried his plea one more time. "Hashem please, if you get my foot out of the tracks, I'll sing along with all the songs at the Shabbos table, and I'll stop wasting my time on computer games. Just save me!"

Just as the train was about to crush his frail body, Moishie's foot broke loose and he fell backwards, the train narrowly missing him. Moishie got up, dusted himself off, looked toward Heaven and said "Hashem - thanks anyway, but I took care of things myself this time!"

It is noteworthy that the Torah's mention of Egyptians serving sheep as a god comes at a later time, after they had already gone ahead and sold their god for food. It is not clear when this occurred, but at some point after the famine's end, the Egyptians reverted to according superhuman qualities to their "cherished" animal.

This cycle is one that repeated itself in many forms and on many different levels throughout history. When people experience difficult times, individually or communally, we come face-to-face with the limitless power of Hashem and our own human frailty. These are particularly humbling experiences, and we must come to terms with our own helplessness and our total dependence on a higher force. Forced, we do so, with gusto, crying out to Hashem in our time of need, and acknowledging Him as our Stone and our Salvation - there is none other! Yet as the crisis thankfully dissipates, so does this awareness. Our confidence returns, and we once again find comfort in the deceptive protection of our own competence.

"A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Yosef (Shemos 1:8)." We so easily forget the message of Yosef, who stood before the pagan world and declared, "It is not from me! G-d will see to Pharaoh's welfare (41:16)." Even during times of good health, peace and prosperity, we must remember to attribute our welfare and success to the only One with the power to grant us these precious blessings. [Based on R' D. Silverberg]

Vulnerability; exposure; susceptibility. These words, and the sensations they bring, make us uncomfortable. Think about the moment before the doctor or nurse sticks you with a hypodermic needle. You feel frail, helpless, exposed. Imagine being under the surgeons scalpel - totally out of control and totally vulnerable. It's not something we like to imagine, and not something we like to feel.

We humans like to imagine we're in control. Much of our time on this world is spent ensuring we are protected, impenetrable to anything that has the potential to bring us down. Vitamins and vaccinations offer protection from illness; exercise and good diet slow down the aging process. We take out insurance policies against our cars, our houses, our lives. (If we can't be in control of the circumstances, let's at least have a say in the outcome.)

It is not to denigrate taking care of oneself; to the contrary, it is a great mitzvah. It is the attitude of needing to be in total control that quickly spirals into avodah zara. Remember, the Egyptians sold their "gods" before they gave away their land. A Jew doesn't "sell" his G-d to accommodate his needs.

Have a good Shabbos.

In loving memory of R' Chaim ben R' Moshe Yechiel Uhr, and R' Chaim Tzvi ben R' Yehoshua. By Mr. and Mrs. S. Farkas.

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