

REDEMPTION - THE LONG AND SHORT OF IT

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

If your impoverished brother is sold to a foreigner residing among you, of to a family of pagans - after being sold he shall have [the right to] redemption... [This is how he is redeemed:] He shall calculate with his purchaser the number of years from when he was sold until the Jubilee [Yovel]. His purchase price should then be apportioned according the total number of years - [his redemption cost] shall be calculated as if he were a yearly labourer. If many years [of servitude] remain, he shall pay for his redemption accordingly, based on his purchase price. If few years remain until the Yovel, this should be calculated. His redemption price must be paid according to his [remaining years]... And if he is not redeemed through these means, he shall go out in the Jubilee Year, he and his children with him. [25:47-54]

In the above parsha, the Torah legislates the terms by which a Jewish slave, sold to a non-Jewish owner, is redeemed. In a nutshell, he has the right to attain his freedom by coming up with enough money to repay his original purchaser for the worth of how ever many years remain in his slavery. Since the Torah mandates that his slavery can never last past the Jubilee year, he was in effect sold until that time. Obviously, then, the closer he finds himself to the Jubilee, the less money he needs to repossess his remaining years.

The holy Chafetz Chaim used to say that he derived tremendous chizuk (encouragement) just from learning this seemingly technical chapter of the Torah. Many people are bothered by the following question: How will Mashiach will ever come? As time passes, not only do we not improve on the deeds and qualities of our ancestors - we dig ourselves deeper into a hole. If the great generations that preceded us couldn't bring Mashiach, do we even stand a chance?

We find, he would say, that each time the Jews were exiled it was for a set number of years - according to the amount of time needed to atone for their sins. In Egypt, Avraham was told in advance that we would suffer for 400 years (Bereishis/Genesis 16:14). Hashem revealed to the prophet Daniel that the Babylonian exile would last seventy years (Daniel 9:24).

Regarding our present, final, and most prolonged exile, it is written (Hoshea 3:4-5), "For many days the Children of Israel will dwell with no king, no officer, and no sacrifice... Afterwards, the Children of Israel will return, and seek Hashem their G-d and Dovid their king, and they will tremble for Hashem and for His goodness, in the end of days." Even these "many days," he would say, must also have a set time - it's just that it wasn't revealed how long they will be.

If the purpose of exile is to atone for sin, it stands to reason that we can shorten its duration by gaining forgiveness in other ways, such as rededicating ourselves to Torah study and mitzvah performance. As the years pass - and less years remain until the final deadline - the lower the "price" becomes to redeem the remaining years. Thus it makes perfect sense that in the early stages of exile, when the outstanding "debt" was still huge, it would have required an exceptional amount of Torah and mitzvos to "buy out" the remaining years. Now, as the "end of days" draws nearer, it becomes easier for us to bring Mashiach - even a small amount of Torah and mitzvos will do the trick! Just like the slave, who in the final years of his slavery can effect redemption with a fraction of his original price, our lowly generation, by committing and dedicating our lives to Torah and mitzvos - even on our level - can indeed accomplish what our ancestors could not!

There's another reason why our humble Torah and mitzvos may in fact be very dear in Hashem's eyes. The Chafetz Chaim used to explain this with a parable: In the early 1900's, in a large Russian city, a grain merchant complained to the Chafetz Chaim about his difficulty making a living. At the time, there was an abundance of grain, and the Chafetz Chaim was surprised that with such favourable conditions it was hard to be successful.

"It's a buyer's market," the merchant said. "There so much grain to be sold that the buyers pick and choose only the highest grade - and that at bargain prices. Plus, they force me to extend them credit, and it takes me forever to see my money. They leave me with all the low-grade produce, which I'm forced to sell for almost nothing to farmers and cattle-raisers for animal feed."

Many years later, after WW1 had taken its toll, and food and produce were scarce, the Chafetz Chaim again met the merchant. "How's business?" he asked.

"Rebbe, baruch Hashem it's great! There's a severe shortage of grain on the market. Whenever I have grain to sell, the buyers line-up in anticipation. An ad-hoc auction ensues, and I'm able to sell my produce at a very handsome mark-up. They're so desperate to buy that they don't even check the quality - they're ready to take shipment immediately, sight unseen! And they pay up-front in cash. I make more today on one wagon-load of grain than I did years ago on a month's worth!"

"Do you hear?" the Chafetz Chaim used to tell people when he would relate this incident. "When there's an abundance, things are cheap and buyers are picky. But when there's a shortage, prices are high and no one even checks to see how good the merchandise is! In our forefathers' times - in the times of the Tanaim, Amoraim, Gaonim, Rishonim - even the early Acharonim, there was a great abundance of Torah. Their minds were brilliant, and they had tremendous patience and discipline. Back then, only the purest Torah - that learned with a perfect heart and righteous intentions (li-sh'ma) - was acceptable.

"But in our times," he would say, "there's such a severe shortage of Torah and mitzvos that they're 'selling' at massive premiums - and Hashem hardly even checks the quality of the 'merchandise!' 'Just bring me all your Torah and mitzvos,' He says. Nowadays, whatever a Yid can do has value we

can't even begin to estimate!"

A learned Talmid Chacham once remarked to me, "Who can imagine the s'char (reward) for those who choose to dedicate their lives to Torah study in our times, when there's so much out there to distract and divert, and when true dedication and commitment are such rare qualities." Our mitzvos may indeed pale in comparison to the deeds of earlier generations, but when there's a shortage in the market, and we've got the merchandise, we'd be fools not to maximize our leverage and "sell" whatever we possibly can.

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