

LEAVING EGYPT - NO REGRETS

by Rabbi Eliyahu Hoffmann

In the latter part of last week's parsha, Bo, the Torah describes how the Jews were sent out of Egypt.

Pharaoh got up during the night, he and all his servants and all of Egypt. There was a great outcry in Egypt, for there was not one house in which a corpse could not be found. He called Moshe and Aaron at night and said, "Get up - leave from among my nation, you and the Children of Israel! Go and serve Hashem as you have spoken. Take your sheep and cattle, as you said - and bless me too!" The Egyptians were also urging the people to hurry and leave the land. "We are all dead men," they were saying. (12:30-33)

Having suffered through 10 plagues, the Egyptians, it seems, couldn't get rid of us quickly enough. In Psalms (Tehillim 105:38), King David describes the joy the Egyptians experienced in shipping off their slaves- turned-nemesis:

Egypt rejoiced when they left, for their fear had fallen upon them.

Bearing this in mind, the Midrash's interpretation (Shemos Rabbah 20:7) of the first words of parshas Beshalach need some explaining:

"Va-yehi beshalach Par'aoh es ha'am, And it was when Pharaoh sent the people out...' Who was saying 'vei' (a play on the word va-yehi, as in 'oy vei!')? Pharaoh was saying 'Vei!'"

If Pharaoh couldn't wait to get rid of them, why was he running around screaming "vei?" Also, why does the Torah describe Pharaoh taking the Jews out of Egypt - wasn't it really Hashem Who took them out?

Perhaps comparing Pharaoh's divorcing the Jews from Egypt with another kind of divorce, between husband and wife, can shed some light on these Scriptural nuances. The Gemara (Gittin 62b) considers the case of a husband who appoints an agent (shaliach) to deliver a get (divorce papers) to his wife, but changes his mind before the get reaches her. The Mishna rules that unless the agent had been clearly instructed by the wife to act as her agent to receive the get (in which case it would be binding as soon as her agent receives it), the husband can retract as long as it has not yet been delivered. Rashi explains that although one can sometimes function as a person's agent without being specifically appointed (zachin le-adam she-lo be-fanav), that is only true when the agent is acquiring something beneficial for the co-party. It is presumed, however, that receiving divorce papers is detrimental for a woman (in the words of the Gemara (Kiddushin 41a), "Two bodies are

better than one."), and therefore the get's courier can not function as the wife's agent unless explicitly instructed by her to do so.

What if we know (as is often the case) that the woman is happy to get out of her marriage? Can the agent function on her behalf without her instruction (in which case the husband could no longer retract)? This question is considered by the Talmud Yerushalmi (34a). The Talmud rules that even in such a case, we can not presume beneficiality, "for perhaps she has changed her mind."

What if there are witnesses who testify that they were with the woman at the exact moment the agent received the get, and she had no regrets? The Tur (Even Ha-ezer 140) rules that even under such circumstances the divorce is not binding until she receives the papers. Why not? Has it not been demonstrated that this is a case of clear-cut beneficiality?

The Gemara (Kiddushin 40b) discusses the case of a person who conducted himself wickedly all his life, yet before his death he performed sincere teshuva (repentance). None of his wickedness will be recalled! And what of the man who was righteous all his life, yet before his death slid off the path and descended into immorality? None of his mitzvos will be remembered! What a terrifying thought. Everything he accomplished in his lifetime all goes poof! Reish Lakish, thankfully, qualifies the Gemara's statement. Just like the wicked man's teshuva must contain an element of regret in order for it to be valid (regret/charatah is one of the crucial components of repentance), likewise the righteous man only forfeits his mitzvos if he regrets ever having done them.

(Somewhat tangentially, it emerges from this how important it is to never regret a mitzvah we've already done. Sometime we undertake something that turns out to be much harder than we originally expected. With great sacrifice, we persevere and see it through to the end, but later remark that, "It was an ill-conceived idea, and I never should have done it." Never say that. One might remark that, "Although I don't regret having done that, I probably wouldn't do it again," but to express remorse runs the risk of losing the zechus of the mitzvah we worked so hard to complete!)

If later remorse can revoke the validity of previous decisions, then perhaps as the Yerushalmi explains, the woman will later change her mind about having wanted to be divorced. Since she never appointed the courier as an agent, but rather we relied on her implicit satisfaction to consider him as her de-facto shaliach, revocation of that satisfaction might indeed render him retroactively invalid. (See Tiferes Yaakov, Gittin ibid. and Ve-darashta Ve-chakarta, vol. 1 Beshalach p. 147 that get is something which is inherently detrimental and thus such logic might apply).

This explains why the Midrash refers to Pharaoh as crying "Oy vei!" Even though at the time he couldn't wait to get rid of them, since he was destined to regret his decision, it is considered as if he never really wanted to send them in the first place.

Similar concerns were brewing here in regard to our departure from Egypt. We had left willingly, excited to escape the servitude of Pharaoh and enter the Promised Land where we could instead serve Hashem. Yet there was potential trouble in the making. According to Targum Yonasan,

200,000 armed soldiers had escaped from Egypt before the Exodus, but were massacred in an ensuing war. Their corpses remained strewn over the fields of Plishtim, and Hashem was concerned that were the Jews to travel that way (and witness the devastation of those who disobey Hashem (they left without being told)), they may have second thoughts about whose servant it's better to be.

And it was when Pharaoh sent out the people - crying, so to speak, as he did so, that Hashem decided not to lead them through the land of Plishtim, saying, "Perhaps" - just like Pharaoh, they too will have regrets upon seeing the corpses of war, and they will have returned to Egypt - once they regret having left, it's as if they never chose to do so in the first place. (Based on Ve-darashsta Ve-chakarta ibid.)

While there's no substitute for the time and energy we put into our mitzvos, of equal impart is the attitude with which we approach them. Do we approach mitzvos with excitement and anticipation, or is it more a feeling of obligation and burden? How we do something, and the feelings that go into it, can be equally, if not more important, than what we do.

Have a good Shabbos.

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