QUESTIONS TO PONDER

by Rabbi Jeff Kirshblum

"And it was (va'yehi) when Pharaoh sent out the people that G-d did not lead them the way of the land of the Philistines, though it was close, because He said that the people will have regrets when they see war and they will return to Egypt" (13:17).

There are several questions that should be asked concerning this verse. The Medrash (Shemos Rabbah 20:7) says that every portion of the Torah that begins with the word va'yehi, "and it was," is a cry of woe (Va'yehi can also mean Oh,Woe!). If so, then the verse is stating that Pharaoh was emitting a cry of "Woe" and bemoaning the fact that he sent forth the Children of Israel from Egypt. Why would he regret sending them out? Their presence in Egypt caused many plagues to befall the Egyptians. Pharaoh, just a few days earlier, was so anxious to rid himself of the Jews that he did not even allow them time to bake bread. Why would he suddenly change his mind?

In addition, why are the Children of Israel simply referred to in the verse as "the people" and not by their proper name, the Children of Israel, as they usually are?

Another question to be raised is why the verse attributes the Exodus of the Jews to Pharaoh, "And it was when Pharaoh sent out the people." Was it not the hand of G-d that brought forth the Israelites?

Another question is that the verse seems to connect two unrelated thoughts. The first is that Pharaoh it seems regretted freeing the Israelites. The second thought is that G-d did not lead the Israelites to Canaan through the land of Canaan, though it was the shorter and more direct route, because surely the Philistines would come out to wage war and the frightened Israelites would flee back to Egypt. Why does the verse connect these two distinctly different ideas?

Why would the Israelites fear going into battle? The very next verse says that "the Children of Israel went up (from Egypt) armed." It seems that they were prepared to wage war if necessary.

Rashi, quoting the Medrash, says that the Hebrew word for "armed," chamushim, can also mean "one-fifth." Only one-fifth of the Jews departed from Egypt; four-fifths had died during the plague of Darkness. Why does the Medrash choose to tell us that at this particular point, after the Jews had left Egypt? Why did it not tell it to us earlier, during the plague of Darkness?

Earlier, the Torah said that a great multitude of Egyptians accompanied the Israelites when they left Egypt (12:38). The Targum Yonassan says that 2,400,000 Egyptians went out with the Children of Israel. We know that only one-fifth of the Jews left Egypt and that was 600,000 men. If one-fifth of

the Jewish people totaled 6000,000, then 2,400,000 had died during the plague of Darkness. Now, we find a most remarkable "coincidence." The number of Egyptians that accompanied the Israelites exactly equaled the number of Israelites who died during the plague of Darkness. The implication is that these Egyptians took the place, in some respect, of those Jews who perished.

Who were those Egyptians who accompanied the Israelites? The Medrash describes these Egyptians as the elite of their society. They were the wise men, the wealthy and the craftsmen. Pharaoh allowed them to depart with the Israelites. Later, Pharaoh did not regret sending out the Israelites; it was these elite Egyptians that he regretted allowing to leave. It was those Egyptians, who the verse calls "the people," that would have feared war from the Philistines. It would be those people who would want to return to Egypt. So, instead of taking the most direct route to the Promised Land, through Philistine territory, G-d led the people around through the desert. (Shemos Rabbah 20:2)

G-d promised Abraham that his children would leave Egypt with "a great treasure" (Bereishis 15:14). The Ari explains that the great treasure was not just the gold and silver vessels the Jews took with them out of Egypt; the great treasure was the eruv rav. The elite of Egyptian society had within themselves some redeeming social and spiritual value. Moshe wanted them to become assimilated into the Jewish people, bringing with them their unique talents and qualities. When the verse says that "(the Israelites) emptied out Egypt" (12:37), it does just not refer to the gold and silver; the Israelites emptied out Egypt of every person who had some redeeming spiritual value. Egypt was left empty and bare. Although the eruv rav may have had some redeeming qualities, nevertheless, they were a destructive force amongst Klal Yisrael. It was the eruv rav who insisted on building the Golden Calf. It was the eruv rav who complained time after time to Moshe. The influence of these Egyptian aristocrats was very powerful. (See Va'yoel Moshe, Parshas Beshalach)

THE LONGER ROUTE MAY BE THE SHORTER PATH

There were two routes that led to the Promised Land. One was a direct course along the major trade route through the land of the Philistines. The other way was to detour to the south through the harsh Sinai Desert in order to circumvent the Philistine territory. The direct route would afford many opportunities to purchase food and water. The road was more frequented and therefore smoother and easier to travel. However, the Israelites would be exposed to the Philistine environment. We tend to think of the ancient Philistine nation as a barbaric and almost subhuman species devoid of any culture. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Philistines were perhaps the most culturally advanced nation of the world at that time, more so than the Egyptians. The Philistines made great advances in the arts. Their pottery was desired everywhere. Their skills in the crafts were envied. They were culturally advanced but spiritually and morally barbaric. One merely has to think of the Nazis who played Wagner's symphonies as the Jews were marched into the ovens. (See People of the sea: The Search for the Philistines by Trude and Moshe Dothan, the eminent authorities on the Philistines and their culture.)

The route through the barren desert was sparsely inhabited. There would be little opportunity to acquire food or water. The terrain was rocky and most inhospitable. Travel would be difficult. There were venomous snakes, scorpions, and other dangerous creatures. But, the Israelites would not have to confront the polluting effects of the Philistine society. There would be no threat to the Jewish soul, only to the Jewish body.

G-d chose the desert route for His children; he would provide all the physical necessities. Had they taken the Philistine route, He would not have provided for all their spiritual needs. Our Sages tell us that "G-d can do anything for us except matters of faith. That, He leaves in our hands" (Berochos 33b). The concept taught here is as follows: as long as we follow in the path of G-d and have faith in Him, G-d will take care of our other needs.

We are often confronted with two paths in life. The more direct route will be more financially rewarding but will expose us to an environment that is spiritually and morally challenging. The other path may be a harsh and struggling route to financial freedom but our exposure to negative influences will be minimal. We see from this parshah that if we take the route that is best for our souls, G-d will take care of our physical needs.

A SONG UNTO G-D

The parting of the Red Sea was a miraculous manifestation of Divine intervention. Not only did G-d save the Jewish nation from ultimate destruction, but He also dealt their oppressors a befitting punishment as well. Pharaoh sought to cast the Israelite children into the waters of Egypt. In the end, it was Pharaoh and his army who were cast into the water. The sea, which had split for the Jews, returned to its previous state in time to send the Egyptian army to their demise. The Israelites, after experiencing this remarkable salvation, wanted to express their joy. The Torah records the song of praise and appreciation that Moshe and the Jewish people sang to Hashem upon their salvation known as "Az Yashir" (15:1-19)

What is the significance of song that expresses feelings towards G-d?

In the secular society, song is regarded as a form of entertainment, an amusement. In Judaism, song is placed on the loftiest level of spirituality, for song can inspire joy and joy causes the Divine spirit to manifest itself (Shabbos 30b). Song can also communicate the sorrow of the heart that mere words are unable to. Traditionally, somber music was played at Jewish funerals (Kesubos 46b). Song was such an integral part of the Temple service that only the Levites could participate in the choral service. In the Temple, the Levite choir sang and the Levite orchestra played. The inspiration was so vital that the Temple service was deemed invalid without the Levite music (Erachin 11a). The Sages even permitted the musical accompaniment to be performed on Shabbos (Sukah 50b).

Words communicate ideas. Music communicates emotion. If someone simply says, "I love chocolate," in a monotone voice, he is conveying an idea. If the same person says, "I looove cho-co-late," in a sing-song manner, he is communicating the emotion he feels when it comes to chocolate.

Just try to say "I love you," and really mean it, in a monotone voice. It is impossible. Emotion is always accompanied with melody.

Since antiquity, people have found that there were times when they needed to express themselves in a deeper fashion than mere words could convey. The artist would express the feelings of his heart through landscapes, portrait, and other sketches of life. Poets conveyed their emotions through verse. The Jewish people choose song to express their feelings of joy and thankfulness. The seven notes of the musical scale are given mystical meaning. They correspond to the seven Kabbalistic sephirot: Chesed (kindness), Gevurah (strength), Tiferes (Splendor), Netzach (eminence), Hod (beauty), Yesod (foundation), Malchus (majesty). The Vilna Gaon told his students that without the study of music theory, one cannot fully grasp the wisdom of the Torah.

There is an interesting difference between words and song. Words can sometimes be inspirational. But when one is depressed and he thinks of those words, it fails to inspire. The sadness of the depression is stronger than the message of the words. Words are powerless to shake off the oppressive mood of sadness and depression. An inspiring melody is different. It has the power to transcend the sadness and shake off the depression. It can elevate the spirit. King David said, "In the (darkness of) night, His song shall be with me" (Tehillim 42:8). King David would sing to bring himself up from the depths of despair (Pesachim 117a).

Every emotional event is an occasion for song. After the Israelites crossed through the Red Sea, their joy was unbounded. Words alone could not contain their great emotion. The words had to be sung. And so, "Then sang Moshe and the Children of Israel this song unto G-d" (15:1).

That moment was truly mystical and magical. There were no rehearsals. There was no handing out lyrics or musical score. Yet, Moshe and all the Israelites simultaneously uttered the same lyrics and sang the same melody. That instant in time was a manifestation of one of the greatest miracles, the miracle of joyous music.

There is a well known story that is told of a great Rosh Yeshiva. He was asked why his son was not a devoted Jew, yet the yeshiva's caretaker had a son who was a rabbinical scholar. The Rosh Yeshiva answered that at his own Shabbos meal all he could think of was finishing the meal so he could go back to his learning. However, at the caretaker's Shabbos meal, the family would sing Shabbos melodies for hours on end to celebrate the joy of Shabbos. The Rosh Yeshiva himself mournfully told this story several times to emphasize the great significance and power of song to the Jewish people.

The story is told of a mute who came to the synagogue and in the midst of a glorious chanting rendered by the cantor, the mute stood up and screamed as loud as his vocal chords would allow. The congregants were appalled and rushed toward him in an effort to remove him from the shul. The rabbi called out for them to stop. He explained that the mute was expressing his emotion the only way he knew how. The mute's scream was a true expression of prayer and reached the very

doors of heaven.

The clarion call to repent that is sounded on Rosh Hashanah, the blast of the shofar, is not a call that can be contained in words. The piercing cry of repentance transcends the language barrier. It is the same cry as the cry of the mute.

The song was not only an expression of joy and thankfulness for the present salvation of the Jews, it was also an expression of hope and faith for the future of Israel.

Have a great Shabbos!
Jeff Kirshblum

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