

CHANGE YOUR ATTITUDE

by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner

This week we begin the Sefer [Book] of Shemos. "V'eleh shmos Bnei Yisroel haba'im Mitzraima [And these are the names of Bnei Yisroel that came to Egypt]... Yosef, his brothers and the entire generation died. [1:1,6]"

The descent to Mitzrayim was related to us in Breishis -- why is it repeated again at the start of Shemos?

The Ramban explains that this is the Book of Galus [Exile] and Geulah [Redemption]. The descent is reiterated now since this is the very inception of the galus.

The Kli Yakar offers an additional explanation. He asks why the new sefer begins with the word "And". He explains that after Yosef's death, the Egyptians had a completely different attitude to the Jews. Even though the Jews had already been there for a while, this change of attitude made them feel as if they had just come. "And these...came." They came before but now it seems that they came again.

What brought about this marked change of attitude?

"And a new king arose in Mitzrayim who didn't know Yosef [1:8]." The Medrash understands that it was actually the same Paroah. As the Jews began to multiply and fill the land of Mitzrayim, the people approached Paroah and demanded that he find a solution for this Jewish problem. Paroah responded angrily to them: "Fools! It is only through them that we've been eating and now you want to turn against them?! Were it not for Yosef we wouldn't be alive!" When they saw that Paroah wouldn't comply, they removed (impeached) him from the throne for three months. When Paroah told them that he'd do as they wished, he was reinstated. This 'new king' acted as if he didn't know Yosef.

However, to understand that our difficulties arose as a result of an internal Egyptian power struggle would be very superficial. The Nation of Hashem cannot be touched by the whims of other nations. They can only be the pawns who inadvertently bring about the fulfillment of the Divine Will.

The Medrash continues and teaches that when Yosef died, Bnei Yisroel 'canceled' bris milah [the covenant of circumcision], saying: "Let's be like the Egyptians". Hashem then took the love the Egyptians had for the Jews and turned it into hatred.

The Beis HaLevi asks the obvious question. How could it be that this holy generation, coming right

after the generation of the Tribes themselves, cast off the mitzvah of milah? Furthermore, he says, the Medrash teaches later on that when the Jews were circumcising their sons, the Egyptians tried to convince them not to. "Don't circumcise, your children would be like the Egyptian children and the oppressive slavery will be lightened." The Jews responded: "Our forefathers, Avrohom, Yitzchok and Yaakov didn't forget their Father in Heaven, and neither will we. We therefore see that the mitzvah of bris milah was adhered to and performed throughout the period of slavery. How can this be understood in light of the Medrash above which stated that they canceled bris milah?

The Beis HaLevi explains that the Bnei Yisroel knew that they'd be enslaved in Mitzrayim for a long, arduous four hundred years. With the death of Yosef, they knew it would soon begin and they were frightened. How would they survive? They thought that if they'd get close to the Egyptians and lessen the differences between them, then the animosity and the severity of the enslavement would in turn be lessened.

The only mitzvah [commandment] they had was bris milah. This caused a physical difference between them and the Egyptians -- the type of difference that they were concerned about. They therefore decided to perform the bris milah as commanded but to immediately afterwards stretch the remaining skin thereby concealing the fact that the bris had been performed. This, they felt, would cover all bases. The mitzvah had been performed but the harmful repercussions of that performance would be avoided.

Although there was no actual transgression in doing this, nevertheless the results of this plan could have been disastrous. Without a recognizable difference between them and the Egyptians, the Jews were in danger of being assimilated into the degenerate society of Mitzrayim. One aspect of bris milah is that we should be, and remain, apart from the societies which accept and display standards that are very foreign to us.

How did Hashem deal with and prevent this danger? "And a new king arose in Mitzrayim who didn't know Yosef [1:8]." Hashem planted a hatred toward us in the hearts of the Egyptians. This wasn't a punishment as we hadn't done anything wrong. It was a safeguard that Hashem deemed necessary to ensure our unique role and destiny in the course of mankind.

As long as we were differentiating ourselves from the Egyptians, they didn't have this hatred -- it wasn't necessary. Once we were looking to break the barriers between us and the Egyptians, Hashem produced a different type of barrier.

Ultimately, at the time of the redemption when we separated ourselves from the Egyptians by sacrificing the korbon [sacrifice] Pesach and by openly performing the bris milah, we then found favor in their eyes.

I heard in the name of Rav Chaim Volzhiner that if a Jew doesn't make kiddush [the benediction on wine said on Shabbos and holidays] then the gentile makes havdalah [the service said at the end of Shabbos, separating between Shabbos and the weekdays]. If a Jew doesn't sanctify (kiddush)

himself but rather, tries to melt into the society of the gentiles, then those gentiles will decide to exclude him, keeping him separate (havdalah). No Jews allowed in this country club...

Unfortunately, we often see things in a backward and twisted manner. We see someone openly displaying his Judaism and we feel uncomfortable, thinking that such behavior only brings hatred against us. In fact, as we've learned from the Beis HaLevi, the exact opposite is true.

Rav Avrohom Twersky, who dresses in Chassidic garb, was once approached by a very irate Jew. "What's the matter with you?! Why do you insist on prancing around in that medieval get-up? Don't you realize how ridiculous you look? You bring scorn and derision onto all Jews!"

"I don't understand thee and what thou hast said," Rav Twersky responded. "For you see, I am Amish and this is the mode of dress that we've maintained throughout the generations."

"I beg your forgiveness," pleaded the quickly back-pedaling Jew. "I didn't realize that you were Amish. You should know that I only have the utmost respect for you and your people -- keeping your ways without bowing to society's whims of the day."

"Well, in fact, I'm Jewish," Rav Twersky informed the now thoroughly confused fellow. "Why can you respect in others what you can't respect in yourself?"

May we recognize the unique role we are meant to play and understand that it's only our firm commitment to being who we are that enables us to play that role.

Good Shabbos,

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