

# FEELING ONES PAIN

*by Rabbi Yisroel Ciner*

This week we read the parsha of Vaera . In last week's parsha, Moshe's first appearance before Paroah to demand freedom for his people, Bnei Yisroel [the Children of Israel], had led to a harshening of the conditions. The same quota of bricks was being demanded with the straw no longer being provided. Moshe was angrily rebuked by some members of Bnei Yisroel.

Moshe is now given comforting words of encouragement to deliver to Bnei Yisroel but they didn't accept his words. This was because they were too "short of breath" due to their tortuous state and the "hard work" they were being subjected to [6:g].

We find a strange situation in Mitzrayim [Egypt]. While the slavery was going at full tempo, Moshe and Aharon were able to visit the palace of Paroah at will. Rashi [5:4] brings the Medrash that teaches that the entire tribe of Levi was exempted from the hard labor of slavery. The Ramban there explains that every nation had their wise men who would study and teach their laws. As orchestrated by Hashem, Paroah allowed the tribe of Levi to serve in that capacity for Bnei Yisroel and as such they were exempted from the slavery.

Rav Yonasan Eibeshitz offers a fascinating explanation. He writes that Paroah foresaw through his sorcery that the redeemer of Israel would be from the tribe of Levi. Paroah wisely understood that someone who was not being persecuted along with the rest of the nation would not be able to serve as the instrument through whom that persecution would be stopped. Only a person experiencing equal suffering could serve as the leader of a suffering nation. He therefore specifically exempted the tribe of Levi from the bondage, hoping to thereby thwart the development that would be necessary for one of their members to develop into the redeemer of Israel.

This, he explains, was actually the attitude of Bnei Yisroel in the passuk [verse] that we mentioned above. "They (Bnei Yisroel) didn't accept Moshe's words due to their shortness of breath and hard work." They, wallowing in the cruel bondage, couldn't accept that Hashem would choose as their redeemer a member of the tribe that was exempted from that bondage.

If so, how was Moshe in fact able to develop into the redeemer?

Moshe had two sons: "One's name was Gershom because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land.' And one's name was Eliezer because the G-d of my father helped me and saved me from the sword of Paroah. [18:3-4]"

I recently heard an interesting explanation. What kind of stranger in a strange land was Moshe? He was brought up in Paroah's palace in incredible luxury. When he fled to Midyan, he was taken in by Yisro who also seems to have been fairly well to do. What difficulties was Moshe referring to? Furthermore, why does the passuk use the words, "because he said," to introduce the explanation of Gershom's name but not by the explanation of Eliezer's name?

Although Moshe was in fact brought up in luxury, far removed from the bondage, he suffered along with the rest of Bnei Yisroel. As he grew older he "went out amongst his brothers and saw their suffering." Rashi explains that what he saw entered his heart and he suffered along with them. "He saw an Egyptian hitting an Ivri, one of his brothers," and he killed that Egyptian [2:11-12]. Although doing that endangered his life and certainly destroyed his cushioned existence in Mitzrayim, that didn't hinder his response. His brother was being persecuted and he felt that persecution. He responded.

That was the stranger in the strange land that Moshe was referring to. Although he wasn't actually being persecuted, "he said" and totally felt that he was. As the passuk said: "One's name was Gershom because he said, 'I was a stranger in a strange land.'"

We often think that we are feeling someone else's pain but are usually fooling ourselves. Earlier this week I led a group of forty students on a two-day trip to Eilat. We had an incredible time hiking and snorkeling. On the last hike we had climbed a rocky mountain for about an hour when, upon reaching the summit, we were enthralled by the beauty of the Gulf of Eilat, nestled between the mountains of Israel, Egypt, Jordan and Saudi Arabia, that stretched out before us.

I guess I was a bit too mesmerized by the sight because on the way down the mountain I slipped and twisted my knee. It didn't hurt much the rest of the way down, nor did it impede the afternoon snorkeling but by the end of the five-hour bus ride back to Yerushalayim, it was pretty stiff, swollen and hurting.

The next morning, I borrowed a cane and hobbled around pretty slowly. As I was making my way around I realized that it really bothered me to walk like that and have everyone else breeze past me. I thought about some friends who have disabilities and thought of how they must feel knowing that they'll be in that state far longer than the day and a half that I was. I realized that although I might have thought that I was feeling their pain, I really wasn't. It's incredibly hard to feel as if you're there when you're really not there.

Moshe felt the pain that Bnei Yisroel were experiencing. He really felt their pain. He wasn't there but, at the same time, he was totally there. If he hadn't been, he never could have been their redeemer.

That ingredient is necessary whether one wants to be a leader of Yisroel [Israel] or just a true, helping friend to others.

Good Shabbos,

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