

REDEMPTION: TAKE 1

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

As I have mentioned before, every book of the Five Books of Moses is different from the others, having a "flavor" of its own. Each book continues from the previous book (even Bereishis continues on from Devarim, since Jewish history, thought, and time is not linear, but cyclical), but are not merely continuations. It is as if each book represents the approach to a new "corner," to be "turned" in the upcoming book. This is certainly the case of Sefer Bereishis, the Book of Genesis, and Sefer Shemos, the Book of Exodus.

Sefer Bereishis ended with the death of Yosef, in the year 2309. Sefer Shemos begins after the death of all the brothers (the last once being Levi in 2331), and the beginning of Egyptian oppression, in the year 2332, some 23 years later.

What had life been like for the Jews of Goshen over that time?

From the opening verses of the Chumash, it is hard to tell. However, one thing we find out right away, and that is, whatever we had been like and whatever we had been doing until then, we had caught the eye of the Egyptian nobility, and particularly the king of Egypt, and they didn't like what they saw.

But what did they see, and why did it make them so paranoid to want to obliterate the entire Jewish people, if not physically, then certainly spiritually? This the Chumash does reveal:

*A new king arose in Egypt which didn't know Yosef (some say that it was the same old Paroah who just made himself out as if he didn't know Yosef, to overlook any gratitude he should have had to the Jewish people). He told his people, "Behold! The Nation of Israel are more numerous and powerful than we are. Let's deal with them wisely before they increase and it happens, in a time of war, that they join our enemy and fight against us and leave the land."
(Shemos 1:8)*

Come on! As big as the Jewish people had become, and they had grown quite large, could there have been such concern? Did the Jewish people express any desire to take over the country? When treated well, do the Jews of any particular country turn against that country (in World War I, Jew

fought against Jew having found themselves on different sides of the battle line)?

Do they ever?

There is no question that Jews are politically-oriented, but they are also usually good "guests." For the most part, Jews have shown appreciation to their host nations, often contributing much to the infrastructure of the country in which they live. In the entire history of the Jewish people, there has never been a time when the Jewish people ever plotted to take over the reigns of government of a foreign land, and are usually much happier minding their own business. So what did Paroah see to make him worry, and every anti-Semite throughout history of mankind, for that matter?

He didn't see anything, really, at least not on his own. Rather, Destiny called.

Prejudice may be a function of physical differences, and perhaps even of religious beliefs. But anti-Semitism is not. As Hitler (may his memory be eradicated) proved, Jews can look like their non-Jewish neighbors, talk like their non-Jewish neighbors, belong to the same clubs as them, and even, very unfortunately, share the same religious beliefs as their non-Jewish counterparts, yet, still, earn their hatred and wrath.

Witness how in Russia the most assimilated Jews were often the most obvious targets for the Russian anti-Semites. Notice how today, in Poland, anti-Semitism exists even where Jews do not (not to mention that the Poles murdered liberated Jews after the war who had hoped to return to their former pre-war lives). The "New York Times Magazine" even wrote about how some farmers in the Mid-West and their "Survivalist" colleagues are stock-piling weapons, ammunition, and food for their eventual "showdown with the Jews" (whom they believe control the American banks and took away their farms and livelihood)! And can we ever forget the accusations of the "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion," which, according to an article in "Reader's Digest," is alive and well and circulating amongst the anti-Semites of the world.

No matter how you look at it, anti-Semitism is a strange animal, a frighteningly strange beast!

From a Torah perspective, non-Jewish anti-Semitism (yes, unfortunately, there is Jewish anti-Semitism as well, usually a mask for religious self-hatred), is not merely skin deep. As we discussed in Parashas BeChukosai and Parashas Ki Savo, G-d expects much more from us as a nation than to simply be good "guests." He expects us to strive spiritually, and to radiate His light. Anti-Semitism is His device to let us know that we are forsaking our *raison d'être*, and to move us back in the direction for which we were created. According to the Torah, the severity of the anti-Semitism depends upon how early we wake up to this reality and assume our true identity.

"Religious diatribe!" you might be saying to yourselves. "He's just trying to scare me into de-assimilating, into becoming more committed to Judaism."

You're right. On the other hand, I'm just elaborating on the Torah's model: small group of Jews moves in. They multiply and do well in business. They grow more, and do better per capita than their

own host nation. Non-Jews do not celebrate this but get nervous instead; they find an excuse to hate us, and then to let that hatred reveal itself ... The rest is, as they say, history, and the prototype laid down in this week's parsha.

Hence, it is ludicrous and downright dangerous to say, "Well, that could never happen here ... and that could never happen there ..." Such statements presuppose that anti-Semitism follows the laws of nature, and has a logic to it. It does not, at least not one that we can always readily discern. And as the parashah's of history have proven, anti-Semitism is always a stepping stone to a new era of Jewish history, one that, had we moved towards that new era on our own, we might have avoided altogether.

When Destiny calls, be sure to answer the door.

Shabbos Day:

A man from the house of Levi married a daughter of Levi. The woman conceived and gave birth to a son. She saw that he was good and hid him for three months. (Shemos 2:1)

When Moshe was born, the house was filled with light. It is written here, "... And she saw that he was good ..." and there it is written, "God saw the light, that it was good ..." (Sota 12a)

The fact that the same word describing the Hidden Light of creation ("good") created on the first day is also used to describe Moshe himself, may, on the surface, seem insignificant. However, the rabbis saw in this a connection between the Supernal light and Moshe Rabbeinu, the future leader of the Jewish people.

What makes this connection even more significant is the date of Moshe's birth: 2368 from creation, thirty-six years after Egyptian bondage actually began. As we have said in other weeks, thirty-six is a number that always alludes to this light (which shone for thirty-six hours before being hidden). Hence, though the light of creation was hidden after shining for thirty-six hours during the first week of creation, the light was again revealed through the birth of Moshe thirty-six years into enslavement.

According to Rashi, Moshe's vision extended to beyond what the physical eye could see.

He saw an Egyptian hitting a fellow Jew. He looked there and there, and when he saw that no one else was around, he smote the Egyptian and buried him in the sand. (Shemos 2:12)

The midrash states that the reason why the Egyptian beat the Jew is because he had been with the

Jew's wife and now wished to do away with him. Moshe, through prophetic vision, was able to see this, and felt justified in executing the Egyptian himself. And not only could he see this, but:

"He looked there and there ..." He saw what he [the Egyptian] did in the house, and what he did in the field ... "He saw that no one else was around ..." That no one would come from him who would convert. (Rashi)

Hence, Moshe was able to see into the past and the future while standing in the present.

The Kabbalists write that, the entire time that Moshe was alive, and led the Jews in the desert, they possessed the potential, through him, to rectify the sin of Adam who had eaten from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Up until the episode during which Moshe hit the rock instead of speaking to it to bring forth water (BaMidbar 20:7), Moshe was there to act as a spiritual conduit to draw down this special, corrective light of creation. Had he done so, you'd be reading this parsha sheet in the Garden of Eden instead.

But what was Moshe's real strength? This we learn from Rashi much later on in the Chumash, during the confrontation with Moav right before Moshe's death:

Moav said to the Elders of Midyan (BaMidbar 22:4) ... What did Moav see that made them seek the advice of Midyan? When they saw that Israel was victorious in a supernatural way, they said, "Their leader [Moshe] came from Midyan. Let us ask them what is his trait." They [Midyan] told them, "His strength is only in his mouth." They [Moav] said, "We will attack them with someone whose strength is in his mouth too." (Rashi)

His mouth? What does Moshe's mouth have to do with anything? Big muscles, or a great knowledge of practical Kabbalah with which to smote enemies (which, incidentally, is how Moshe killed the Egyptian, by uttering one of G-d's holy Names)-that's power! The pen may be "mightier than the sword," but who said anything about a mouth?

We'll talk about this more, b"H, in the upcoming weeks. But in the meantime, let's not forget the fact that the holiday that celebrates our freedom from Egyptian slavery is called "Pesach," which can be divided into two words, "peh" and "sach"-the "mouth that spoke"-a holiday celebrated by the verbalization of the account of the redemption (Haggadah). Or, how the Jews were oppressed by an evil ruler named "Paroah," which means "evil mouth," who made them work "b'pharech" (with a "soft mouth").

Perhaps this is why the Zohar comments, "From a man's mouth you can tell what he is" (Zohar BaMidbar 193). In any case, the covenant that best describes our relationship to G-d and represents our commitment to physical and spiritual freedom is called, "Bris Milah," the Covenant of the Word, which seems to indicate that speech is the highest representative of man's creative power. No,

according to Torah, talk is not cheap, and if anyone appreciated this most, it was Moshe Rabbeinu.

Seudos Shlishi:

Moshe returned to G-d and said, "G-d! Why have You done such evil to this people?! Why did You send me?! Because I went to Paroah to speak in Your Name, he has done evil to this people! You have not redeemed this people at all!" (Shemos 5:22)

Understandably, Moshe was upset. He had gone to Paroah, as G-d had commanded him to, and demanded the release of the Jewish people. And on cue, Paroah promptly rejected his plea, and not only didn't free the Jewish people, but even increased their burden. Moshe left Egypt not as the instrument of freedom he had hoped to be, but the cause of increased Jewish suffering! Did he not have cause for complaint, even to G-d?

On the other hand, hadn't G-d warned Moshe that he would fail the first time? If so, then why was Moshe so upset? The answer was, "Reject my plea, yes!" Moshe complained. "But use it as an excuse to make their lives more miserable ... we never spoke about that! You call that redemption?!" Moshe cried out.

"Yes," G-d could have said. "Let me give you an analogy. Let's say, Moshe, you wanted to build a house, but you didn't have enough money to do so. So what are you going to do?"

"Borrow from the bank, I suppose."

"Right. Now, let's say you wanted to borrow \$20,000 to build that house, and I lent it to you, interest-free of course, to be paid back after 20 years. That's about \$83.33 a month. However, after 10 years of making monthly payments, you decide, 'Enough with these payments! I want out!' What do you have to do? Do you simply stop making the payments?"

"No, that would be stealing. I would have to pay you the balance of whatever I still owed you."

"Exactly, Moshe. Now how much would you have to pay me at that time? Up until then you would have been making monthly payments of \$83.33. But now you still owe me ..."

"Ten thousand dollars ... I would have to pay you back the balance of \$10,000 ..."

"At one time ... right Moshe?"

"Right, G-d."

"You see Moshe, the Jewish people, to complete the process to nationhood should really stay in

Egypt for 400 years in total. However, they're sinking so quickly spiritually that if I leave them in there much longer, there'll be nothing to redeem at the end of the 400 years! But I can't just wipe away the debt ... G-d forbid! That wouldn't be good for them or for creation! So, I have to exact a lump sum from them, now, so that they can go out of Egypt 190 years earlier. In other words, Moshe, don't lose heart. You will see, and so will they, that you were an instrument for freedom after all, though you have triggered increased suffering in the meantime."

Having heard this, Moshe had no trouble following G-d's every instruction, b'simcha, from that point onward.

Melave Malkah:

They [Moshe and Aharon to Paroah] said, "The G-d of the Hebrews happened to meet us; let us go, I ask you, for three-days journey into the desert, and sacrifice to G-d, our G-d ..."
(Shemos 5:3)

"Three days journey"? Did Moshe really mean three days? Hadn't he known from day one that a major and permanent redemption was at hand, and that the Jewish people were going out for good? Why did he, well, for lack of better terms, lie to Paroah? Was he afraid of Paroah? Was he afraid that if he told Paroah the truth, that he wouldn't entertain the possibility of any kind of freedom? Even after all the plagues, and the utter destruction of Egypt, Paroah had still been under the impression that the Jews had planned to come back after their three-day excursion into the desert. In fact, he only pursued them once he realized that they had gone for good.

Perhaps the answer to Moshe's approach (which came from G-d) lies in Paroah's own words:

"Behold! The Nation of Israel are more numerous and powerful than we are. Let's deal with them wisely ..." (Shemos 1:9)

Wisely, Paroah? Don't you mean deviously?

Wisdom is usually a trait attributed to nice, smart people with good intentions ... you know, the kind of people who look for solutions to sticky situations in a truthful way. That does not sound like Paroah at all! You may call it being "wise," Paroah, but G-d calls it being diabolical, and measure-for-measure, you're going to get it right back. And he did. How does that expression go, "He who laughs first, laughs last."

However, we shouldn't laugh too hard at ourselves, because there is a message in this to everyone:

You can fool some of the people some of the time, but G-d, none of the time; and the way you deal with Him, is the way He will deal with you-exactly.

Have a great Shabbos.

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