

YOU CAN TAKE THE JEW OUT OF THE COUNTRY, BUT ...

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

These are the names of the Children of Israel that came to Egypt with Ya'akov-each man and household. (Shemos 1:1)

This verse may have been more accurate had it said, "each man and his family." Although "household" can imply family, still, it also implies "home," and the Jewish people did not transport their homes down to Egypt ...

Or did they?

We know from last week's parshah that Yosef did everything he could to protect the Jewish people from the influences of Egypt. Ya'akov too sent Yehudah down to Egypt to establish places of study and prayer, in advance of the coming of the rest of the family. No one was taking any chances-the environment had to be as "kosher" as it could be for them before their arrival, especially since they were going to Egypt. Hence the verse's wording: each man and his household, as if to say, the family of Ya'akov did everything they could to transport their household life they had developed while living securely in Canaan, to insulate themselves from the effects of the most immoral nation on earth.

This is also why Sefer Shemos opens with the words "these are the names (shemos) ..." As Rabbi Shimon Raphael Hirsch points out, the words "shaim" (name) and "shumm" (there) are related, not just through their spellings, but conceptually as well. For, the point of a name is to make it easy to locate someone in time and space, just as the word "there" does. In a sense, a name is a spiritual coordinate for a person.

Therefore, the posuk is telling us that when the family of Ya'akov came down to Egypt, they did so spiritually intact. You could "locate" them, because among the Egyptians, they were noticeable, being spiritually different than the rest of them.

However, this was only how they "came down" to Egypt; it was not how they remained in Egypt, as we see that they assimilated into Egyptian society over time. Nevertheless, the essence of who they were did not change with time, though it became hidden under layers of Egyptian lifestyle. The essential spiritual coordinate of the Jew had remained there all the time, and this is what kept them

separate enough to make them redeemable.

I witnessed this idea first hand this week.

I happened to be standing in a yeshivah for American Ba'alei Teshuvah this week with little or troubled religious backgrounds, reading the bulletin board when some young man whizzed by me. He was going too fast to be running, and the noise he made indicated to me that he was on roller blades. I ignored it.

A few seconds later, he came flying past me again, obviously very good as his maneuvering revealed, and something inside me said, "Look how we have come to imitate the non-Jews. Not only does this boy skate like a seasoned roller blader, but he's doing it in a place of Torah yet! Is nothing sacred anymore?"

And then, while I was thinking this and he continued on his path out the front door, his left hand reached out with precision timing and then a moment later, was pulled back in just before it hit the door itself. I realize he had kissed the mezuzah on the way out.

I thought to myself, the clothing and the skates are not Jewish, but the soul inside-that's Jewish, that's 100% Jewish. And though I am still not a fan of roller blades (as you can tell), especially when they are used to get around in a place of Torah, I must say, I derived great satisfaction and an impromptu important lesson that night: You can take the Jew out of the country, but you can't take the soul out of the Jew.

Shabbos Day:

A man from the house of Levi had taken a daughter of Levi as his wife ... (Shemos 2:1)

As the verses soon make clear, this verse is referring to Amram and Yocheved, the mother and father of Moshe-future redeemer of the Jewish people. As the Talmud points out, Amram was not only the spiritual leader of the generation, but a spiritually perfect individual as well, dying eventually only because death was decreed on mankind from the time of Adam (i.e., he didn't deserve to die otherwise; Shabbos 54b). This is why his name was "Amram," according to "Asarah Ma'ameros" (64:3), from the words "omer nakki," which literally mean "clean omer."

What is an omer?

An omer is a dry measure used often in the Torah, equal to about two quarts. The munn, the miraculous bread that fell from Heaven for the forty years the Jewish people wandered in the desert, fell in the amount of one omer per person. The Meal-Offerings used in the service of the Mishkan and later, in the Temple, were often measured according to this amount as well.

In short, the omer is more than just a measure; it is also equal in gematria to 310, the number of "worlds" G-d promises to reward the righteous with in the World-to-Come (Sanhedrin 100a). It is a word that alludes to spiritual perfection and trust in G-d, which Amram obviously possessed.

Yocheved, Asarah Ma'ameros continues, was also quite spiritually perfect. This is why Yocheved was born prior to entering Egypt ("between the walls"; Rashi, Bereishis 46:15), a place of terrible spiritual impurity. In fact, the word "Yocheved" (yud, vav, chof, bais, dalet), by rearranging the letters can spell the word, kevodi (chof, bais, vav, dalet, yud), which means "my honor," referring to G-d (i.e., Yocheved's birth brought honor to G-d, so-to-speak). It doesn't hurt either that the numerical value of her name is forty-two (10+6+20+2+4), the number of letters in the Name of G-d that prophets used to meditate on to go into a state of prophecy.

Hence, even though the possukim make it seem as if an ordinary man just happened to take back his wife, and just happened to produce a Moshe Rabbeinu, we see that it is not true. Amram and Yocheved were no ordinary people-they were spiritual giants who produced an even greater spiritual giant, one who would later talk to G-d "face-to-face."

On the other hand, says the Asarah HaMa'ameros, "Amram was prohibited by Torah law from marrying Yocheved since she was his aunt. An uncle is indeed permitted to marry his niece." Thus, for this reason, Moshe did not merit to enter Eretz Yisroel, just as Rachel died when Ya'akov entered Eretz Yisroel on his return from living with Lavan, his father-in-law. (Ya'akov had married two sisters, which, at the time, might have been fine outside of Israel but not inside Israel. Therefore, Rachel died at the point of entry into the country.)

There is a lot to discuss here, but for the time being, we learn that only creation came into being "something from nothing." However, when it comes to creating mortals from mortals, short of a miracle, something must come from something, which emphasizes our own need to take spiritual strides forward if we're going to expect the same from our children.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

Moshe said to G-d, "Who am I to go to Pharaoh? And will I bring the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (Bereishis 3:11)

It is hard to detect from the few verses portraying G-d's appointing of Moshe that he strongly rejected the Divine mission. Indeed, the Midrash says that Moshe demurred for seven straight days, before G-d lost His patience, so-to-speak, and told Moshe that he's to go anyway.

Why did Moshe Rabbeinu so strongly reject his mission? From the verses themselves, it sounds as if Moshe felt he was inadequate for the job. It sounds as if Moshe felt that he could not take on Paroh and the forces of evil that surrounded him.

However, it is brought down that Moshe's sense of inadequacy was not based upon a fear of Paroah, but on a fear of how the Jewish people had fallen to such a low spiritual level. Moshe was telling G-d, in effect, I am not capable of inspiring the people to do such major teshuvah. Can I bring the people back from the abyss of idol worship, and cause them to become worthy of a miraculous redemption?" Moshe complained to G-d. "I can't even bear to see what they look like now, after all their assimilation into Egyptian society!"

However, it is explained, Moshe erred. First of all, he thought that in the end, G-d would punish them for all the idol worship they had committed, and that this was the reason why the oppression increased after he told Paroah to let them go. But that had not been the case; the Midrash explains that G-d forgave them for their sins of idol worship, because it was the spiritual impurity of Egypt that caused them to become involved.

Second of all, we see that later the Jewish people did in fact do teshuvah gemurah-complete repentance, because the verse later says that "they believed in G-d and His servant Moshe" (Shemos 14:31), and that they had "followed after G-d into the desert, and a land that was not sown" (Yirmiyahu 2:2). What Moshe had deemed impossible had in fact occurred after a very short time.

What makes this so inspiring is that as bad as things are for the Jewish people from our perspective, perhaps from G-d's perspective, it is not so hopeless. Everywhere you look, with few exceptions, we have integrated many of the values and priorities of the host societies in which we find ourselves at present. Even religious circles have incorporated far more from the secular environment than might have been the case decades ago. Just like it had happened in Europe, and just like it had happened in Spain before that.

On the other hand, as the Midrash is telling us, so much of this is the result of being in exile for such a long period of time. It is difficult to live amongst so much physicality and not be effected by some of it over time. At first there may be resistance from the Jewish people, as there was at first by Yosef and his brothers, and their families in Egypt. But as time wears on, eventually, assimilation becomes inevitable, starting with the weaker elements of Jewish society and ending up with the stronger elements as well.

G-d takes all of this into account, and will deal with us accordingly, which may be more gently than we might have dealt with ourselves. He knows our hearts and our minds, and understands what we are responsible for, and for what we are not completely responsible.

However, All of that is G-d's business. We have also suffered pogroms and a Holocaust as well; we can't assume that G-d is willing to overlook everything all the time. In the words of one rabbi: It is either program or pogrom-either you actively try to bring the Jewish people to do teshuvah, or, G-d forbid, G-d Himself will do it, His own way. From our perspective, we have to view assimilation as a crisis, and respond accordingly, knowing that G-d will be fair with us all along the way.

Melave Malkah:

Moshe took his wife and his sons, and placed them upon the donkey, and returned to the land of Egypt ... (Shemos 4:20)

When it came time to leave for Egypt, Moshe arranged for the best available transportation of that day: a chamor-a donkey. However, the Midrash tells us that this donkey was not your average donkey:

This is the donkey that was created at twilight during the six days of creation; this is the donkey that Avraham saddled to go and bind Yitzchak his son; this is the donkey that Moshe Rabbeinu rode to Egypt, and this is the donkey that the Son of David (Moshiach) will ride in the future. (Yalkut, Devarim 86a).

Now, that's a donkey that's been around, and, apparently, a very old donkey-presently, 5759 years old! Is the Midrash to be taken literally?

Perhaps. On the other hand, the donkey is the symbol of gashmius-physicality-and a lifestyle devoid of spirituality. The word "chamor" comes from the word "chomer," which means "ingredient," and therefore symbolizes the physical world, and Egypt as well, for that matter.

The struggle of man is to master physicality, to harness its power to facilitate the goals of the soul. For many, it is just the opposite: the soul is the slave of the body. From a Torah perspective, that lifestyle is exile of the worse type. Redemption, on the other hand, is breaking away from such a lifestyle and working on achieving spiritual goals. Maybe that's the donkey that all the redeemers have been riding.

In order for Avraham to sacrifice his beloved son, he had to place more emphasis on spiritual goals than physical ones. This was brought out by his willingness to sacrifice his physical son for a spiritual G-d. Likewise, Moshe, in order to free the Jewish people from the clutches of the nation of physicality, had to first be above its power, and this was symbolized by his riding the chamor and acting as its master.

Similarly, the Moshiach will also possess the same ability to be unaffected by the pull of gashmius, in order to bring an end to a culture that is, for the most part, built from a drive for physical comfort.

Have a great Shabbos,

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