

ON THE "SENT" OF FREEDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

After Pharaoh sent the people away, G-d did not lead them through the land of the Philistines, though it was the closest, "In the event the people experience war and run back to Egypt," G-d said. Instead, G-d led the people through a circuitous route, by way of the desert around the Red Sea. The children of Israel left Egypt armed. (Shemos 13:17-18)

The Talmud enters into a halachic discussion that has some interesting and pertinent information regarding a side issue: the coming of Moshiach. The Talmud writes (and I explain in brackets):

Come and hear: If someone says, "I will be a nazir on day that the Son of David comes," he can drink wine on Shabbos and Yomim Tovim (since Moshiach will not come on such days), but he cannot drink wine the rest of the days of the week (since Moshiach could come those days, and the person's oath to abstain from wine would begin). It follows that it is permissible [for him to drink wine] on Shabbos and Yomim Tovim if [Shabbos] limits exist (i.e., borders around cities outside of which one cannot travel Shabbos -- so how could Moshiach arrive?); however, if you say "limits" don't exist, then why is it permitted [to drink wine] on Shabbos and Yomim Tovim [given his vow]?

"There it is different since the verse says, 'Behold, I am sending you Eliyahu the prophet before the 'Day of G-d' ...' (Malachi 3:23), and Eliyahu didn't come yesterday." "But if so, [according to that line of reasoning, he should be able to drink wine] each day of the week, since [we could know that Moshiach isn't coming today] because Eliyahu didn't come yesterday?!" "Maybe he went to the Large Bais Din [to proclaim Moshiach's imminent arrival] (which means he came, but we just don't know about it yet)?" "In your case also: maybe he went to the Large Bais Din?" [Rather, the real reason that we can assume Moshiach is not going to come on Shabbos or Yom Tov is because] it has already been promised to Israel that Eliyahu will not come on Friday afternoon or the day before Yom Tov because of the difficulty [of causing people to have to come out and greet Eliyahu in the midst of Shabbos and Yom Tov preparations] ... (Eiruvim 43b)

Of course, the rest of us read this and think to ourselves, "WHAT DIFFICULTY?! FORGET ABOUT THE DIFFICULTY! WE DON'T MIND THE DIFFICULTY! PLEASE JUST BRING MOSHIACH ALREADY AND PUT AN END TO THIS LONG AND DIFFICULT EXILE!"

After all, we can always pick Shabbos up at the local Glatt Kosher prepared food store, unless, of

course, they don't get a chance to cook because of Eliyahu's arrival ...

The above Talmudic passage seems a little strange. After all, Eliyahu's and Moshiach's arrival represent a "Super-Reality"; preparing for Shabbos Yom Tov represents a normal reality. Shouldn't the latter reality become insignificant in light of the former one?

One would think so, but, perhaps this is precisely the underlying message of the Talmud: even when Moshiach comes, life will still go on. Life does get better, MUCH better -- but, it still goes on, for, as the Talmud states:

There is no difference between This World and the Days of Moshiach except for the end of oppression of nations. (Brochos 34b)

It was the same way in Egypt as well. As G-d Himself went from Egyptian house to Egyptian house killing the firstborn sons, the Jewish people sat down to their first Pesach Seder, dressed ready to leave at a moment's notice. They had stopped serving the Egyptians months ago (Rosh Hashanah), and redemption had been imminent for some time, but still, they had to live out the rest of exile and act out redemption in so many physical ways. It was strange mixture of the old reality with the new reality.

And now, in this week's parshah, in spite of all the miracles that were done to save the Jewish people until this point, still, the reality of every day life and its concerns remained in the picture. The journey from Egypt to freedom to Eretz Canaan represented another example of that strange mixture of miracle and nature, of Super-Reality and everyday reality.

And this is how, according to tradition, the Final Redemption will occur as well. It will not happen all at once, but in stages. Little by little, the miracles will increase; in fact, at first we might have difficulty recognizing them for what they are: signs that Moshiach's arrival is imminent.

Eventually, though, reality will change enough that there will be no doubting what our eyes and minds are witnessing, though we may have difficulty accepting that, after millennia of waiting, redemption has finally arrived. And, eventually, nature will give way to miracle, that is, G-d will no longer "veil" Himself behind the consistency of nature, and then, redemption in the full sense of the term will have arrived.

Arrive, it did, in Egypt. Arrive, it will, b'ezer Hashem, in the future as well.

Shabbos Day:

Moshe told the people, "Do not fear! Stand still and see the salvation of G-d! For, though you see the Egyptians today, you will never see them again!" (Shemos 14:13)

This is a parshah of redemption. Even though it is in Parashas Bo that the Jewish people actually leave Egypt, it is in this week's parshah, Parashas Beshalach, that the Jewish people leave the Egyptians once and for all:

... For, though you see the Egyptians today, you will never see them again!"

As the Ramban points out, the Talmud Yerushalmi (5:1) hears from Moshe Rabbeinu's words to the Jewish people at THIS time a negative commandment for ALL time. In other words, Moshe Rabbeinu was telling the frightened Jewish nation at this critical moment, "And, by the way, leaving Egypt NOW means leaving Egypt for FOREVER.

Yet, we know that, historically, Jewish communities did spring up and flourish in post-Red Sea Egypt, not to mention that the Rambam himself, who lists this mitzvah as well, lived there for a long period of time (I once read that he used to sign off his letters, "Moshe ben Maimon, who breaks three commandments each day ..."). How could this have been?

So, the Ramban answers this question by adding the words, "of your own free-will." In other words, unless Divine Providence forces you there, you have no business being back in Egypt. In fact, being brought back to Egypt is one of the worst curses mentioned in Parashas Ki Savo (Devarim 28:68); certainly choosing to be there should not represent a viable free-will option for a Jew.

What could be so wrong about going back to Egypt? After all, no nation today is the same as it was back in Biblical times, save for the Jewish people. In fact, the Talmud says, Sennecheriv "mixed up" the nations millennia ago (Brochos 28a), and in this week's parshah, the Red Sea eliminated the best of the rest of Egypt that remained after the Ten Plagues. Egypt the land remained, but Egypt the people did not.

Perhaps an answer can come through Lot's wife, by what she was commanded not to do, and did anyhow:

... Once they had been brought out, the [angels] said, "Run for your life! Don't look back! Don't stand anywhere on the plain! Escape to the mountain or be swept away" ... [However, Lot's] wife looked back and therefore she became a pillar of salt. (Bereishis 19:17, 26)

It doesn't take very much to appreciate why Lot and his family were commanded not to look back. First of all, only righteous people are allowed to see Divine judgment of the evil. But, perhaps more to the point, looking back reveals one's inability to make a clean break from the society from which one has come (which, in this case had been evil S'dom).

Egypt wasn't just a place where the Jews once suffered for an extended period of time. Rather, Mitzrayim embodied all that the Jewish people were brought out of Egypt to counteract. Mitzrayim represented the constriction of G-dly knowledge and the crushing of the Jewish soul. The Jewish people were freed to bring such knowledge back into creation, and to free the Jewish soul from the shackles of faulty living.

To go back to Egypt WILLINGLY, whether it is back to the same people or a different one, minimizes the importance of the redemption from Mitzrayim. When one is disgusted by something, he avoids going anywhere near a reminder of that distasteful thing; it should be the same way for Jews and Egypt.

The Rambam signed off his letters like a man who completely regretted his being in Egypt, though circumstances (i.e., Divine Providence) forced him back there. Perhaps he was brought back to Egypt to redeem the remaining Holy Sparks not "taken out" by the original Jews who left Egypt with Moshe. However, for the rest of us, we are expected to make a clean break from Egypt and Egyptian lifestyle, and, until such time as we do, we cannot expect to experience freedom in the full sense of the term.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

The Talmud makes a remarkable comment:

If the Jewish people had only kept the first Shabbos, not one nation or language would have had any power over them, as it says, "It came to be on the seventh day the people went out to collect [the manna] ..." (Shemos 16:27), and after it writes, "And Amalek came and waged war ..." (Shemos 17:5). (Shabbos 118b)

What the Talmud means is that G-d had commanded the Jewish people not to go to the fields looking for manna on Shabbos, because it wouldn't be there in honor of Shabbos. Of course, Dasan and Aviram -- proverbial thorns for Moshe's -- went anyhow, just to make Moshe look bad (they were hoping to find manna, and make Moshe appear a liar). They failed at that goal, and accomplished a lot worse: an attack against the Jewish people by the nation of Amalek.

Even though, from the Talmud's statement above, Amalek seems to have been only one nation among the rest, it is not coincidental that they were the first to attack the Jewish people after the first Shabbos was broken. The Talmud is implying that our vulnerability to Amalek is based upon the fact that we broke the first Shabbos, and the question is, what is the inherent connection between the two?

Among the many results Shabbos is supposed to accomplish, there is one specific goal of this "day of rest": clarity. The Torah says that G-d rested on the Seventh Day, and therefore, we are told that we must rest too. However, if creating physical existence did not entail any physical exertion on G-d's part, what did He rest from on Shabbos?

The answer is in the definition of "work". Work is that which we do that goes AGAINST our immediate, INSTINCTUAL nature. If something comes naturally to us, then doing it is usually an extension of who we are and what we do; if not, then such an act usually comes only after

overcoming resistance to perform it.

It is extremely "unnatural" for G-d to be hidden from and within His creation. Kabbalah explains that, as negative a concept as "hester panim" (literally, "hiding of [G-d's] face") is, overall, it is crucial for the sake of allowing man to have free-will in life. Nevertheless, "hiding" for G-d goes against His nature, so-to-speak, and constitutes a form of work for Him, again, so-to-speak.

Therefore, if G-d "rested" on Shabbos, it means that on this day of the week, G-d lessened the effect of nature on creation, allowing for a clearer vision of the hand of G-d in everyday life. Keeping Shabbos allows one to be able to hook into this higher reality, and gain this intellectual and spiritual clarity for the upcoming six days of the week.

However, if one does not keep Shabbos, then one never arrives at this level of spiritual clarity, and such a person will sink deeper and deeper into the world of nature and intellectual doubt. It is on this level of existence that one finds and confronts Amalek.

This is because "amalek," in Hebrew, is equal in gematria to the Hebrew word "sufek," which means "doubt." Furthermore, the Hebrew word "amalek" (ayin-mem-lamed-kuf) can be broken up into two parts: "ayin" (eye) and "malak" (mem-lamed-kuf; severed), as if to say, Amalek is the cause/result of the "severed eye."

Which "eye"? The mind's eye, the one with which we can see G-d clearly in life. If one is, G-d forbid, physically blind, he can still "see" G-d in life. However, if one's mind's eye is "blind" to the reality of G-d, then, even if he has 20-20 vision, he won't see the hand of G-d in everyday life, and that is the goal of Amalek.

This is the insight to which the Talmud refers when making the connection between Shabbos and the evil people of Amalek; increasing our observance of Shabbos decreases the effect of Amalek, for, as the Talmud says:

If the Jewish people were to keep two Shabboses, they would be redeemed. (Shabbos 118b)

MELAVE MALKAH:

Halleluyah! Praise G-d, my soul! I will praise G-d while I live, I will music for my G-d while exist. Do not rely upon nobles, nor on a human being, for he holds no salvation ... (Tehillim 146:1-3)

This is the next full tehillah in Pesukei d'Zimrah in the morning prayers (we covered "Ashrei" earlier).

According to the Radak, King David wrote this tehillah as words of encouragement and as a warning for the Jews in exile. It was to encourage Jews to have faith in G-d, even while the nations of the world rise to the top and oppress the Jewish nation. As David says:

He is the Maker of Heaven and Earth ... He does justice for the exploited ...

In other words, even when the non-Jewish nations are on top, G-d never turns his back on the needy, taking care of them from behind the scenes. It is true, that sometimes in history, it seems just the opposite is true. Nevertheless, even then G-d exercises mercy, and we will understand how in the end of days, and on some occasions, even during our lifetime.

However, this is also a warning. In exile, being at the mercy of the non-Jewish peoples, who, from time-to-time, do good for the Jewish people, it is always a possibility of coming to depend upon the hand of man, and identify livelihood with flesh-and-blood benefactors.

However, this is not the case. Such people are only "veils" for the hand of G-d. This is what exile means: receiving from G-d in less-than-obvious ways. To the extent that one can lose track and give too much credit to man, and not enough, or none at all, to G-d Himself.

As we learn from the redemption from Egypt, albeit in a far more obvious way, non-Jews do good for the Jewish people as an extension of G-d's mercy on His people. Realizing and acknowledging this is the first and most important step for keeping the blessing flowing, and not having to witness a change of heart by non-Jewish benefactors. And, it is an important step to redemption itself, and the time that G-d can give freely to us without any intermediaries at all.

Have a great Shabbos,
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