REDEMPTION & COMING OF AGE

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

Friday Night:

The duration of the stay of the Children of Israel in Egypt had been 430 years. At the end of the 430 years, on precisely that day, all the hosts of G-d went out from Egypt. It is a night to be observed for G-d, for bringing them out from Egypt -- a night to be observed for G-d by all the children of Israel throughout their gen-erations. (Shemos 12:40-41)

Of the thirty-nine principle creative activities that the Torah forbids on Shabbos, "Birrur" -- "Separation" -- has to be the most difficult "melacha" to relate to. Building, writing, baking, weaving, etc. -- these are all quite creative activities with very creative and useful results. But, what major difference does pulling a rotten apple out of a bowl full of nice apples to me or the world in general?

Of the thirty-nine principle creative activities that the Torah forbids on Shabbos, "Birrur" -- "Separation" -- has to be the most IMPORTANT "melacha" to relate to. For, if you think about it, it is the Av Av-Melacha -- the "Principle" of all the "Principle-Melachos."

Name any constructive process in creation, and you will see that, from beginning to end, it is about separation. For example, in order to build something -- let's say a house -- you have to first come up with the idea for the house, including the location. Some ideas are better than others, and, some places are preferable over other places.

Before the decision is made, the good ideas are mixed together with the less-than-good ideas; the good locations are, conceptually-speaking, combined together with the less-than-desirable locations. As the best idea emerges, and, when the location is finally decided upon, they are said to have been "separated out" from the rest.

It is the same with the materials for the house. Though, today, we often find ready-made products on the shelf, available for immediate use, the truth is, at some point in time those products were extracted from something else -- lumber from trees, metal nails from iron ore, etc. Contrary to popular belief, Corn Flakes does not grow on the shelves of the supermarket, nor anything else we eat for that matter.

Thus, without a doubt, Life, is about taking "raw materials" and, refining their substances for constructive, and, in truth, holy usages -- of separating the "cons" from the "pros," making the best of

the latter and rejecting the former -- whether we are building a house or a life for ourselves and others

The ongoing necessity for refinement of creation, teach the Kabbalists, is the result of the First Man -- Adam HaRishon's -- sin. Prior to Adam's sin of eating from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, good and evil existed, but, separately from each other. The result of capitulating to the snake -- the manifestation of the yetzer hara and embodiment of evil at that time -- was the intermingling of evil with good, like "sour dough" that is combined with dough.

Therefore, the process of "tikun" -- rectification -- for the world to return it to its former state of paradise (and better), is to reverse the process that Adam HaRishon inadvertently began when he disobeyed G-d by eating the forbidden fruit. That process, as known to Kabbalah, is what we refer to as "Birrur" the refinement process that separates good from evil, which is continuous, the purpose of the six working days (you thought they were for learning Torah or earning a living?), and what we abstain from on Shabbos to remind ourselves that this is what we are supposed to be doing the rest of the days of the week.

This is really what "Yetzias Mitzrayim" (Redemption from Egypt) was, is, all about. Re-quoting the Arizal from Parashas Shemos:

"Could any other god come and take a nation out from within a nation ..?" (Devarim 4:34). Chazal teach, it does not say "a people within a nation," rather, "a nation from within a nation," because it was really this, since they were well within the midst of the Klipos (Spiritual Impurities), and were a "nation" like them. They were then refined, purified, and taken from the midst of that "nation" literally.

Egypt is called the "Iron Furnace," the great "smelting pot" of history. It was there that Klal Yisroel first became a "nation" -- that they first "became of age" -- in the full sense of the term. But not IN Egypt, but as they LEFT Egypt, as they were "smelted" out from amongst the Egyptians, as they were extracted from amongst the K'lipos in which they had been immersed for 210 years. It was the beginning of a process that, like at the start of history, G-d initiated and man, now the Jewish people -- are expected to complete.

This is what we remember Seder Night:

It is a night to be observed for G-d, for bringing them out from Egypt -- a night to be observed for G-d by all the Children of Israel throughout their gen-erations.

Shabbos Day:

On that very day, G-d brought the Children of Israel out of Egypt. G-d told Moshe, "Sanctify all the firstborn to Me, the first off-spring of every womb of the Children of Israel, both of man and of animal;

they are Mine." Moshe told the people, "Remember this day, in which you went out of Egypt, out of the house of servants. Through force G-d brought you out of here -- nothing leav-ened will be eaten " (Shemos 12:51 - 13:3)

The rabbis teach us that for the first thirteen years of a child's life, he or she lack's a yetzer tov, an inclination to genuinely do the right thing. Kabbalistically, as the Arizal explains in Sha'ar HaGilgulim, this means he or she has only received the lowest level of soul, the Nefesh, the minimal amount of soul necessary to live a normal physical existence. Mystically, at age thirteen, the potential to receive the next level up -- Ruach -- becomes real.

(What I will write applies for a girl at Bas Mitzvah age of twelve years.)

Every child who leaves his pre-Bar Mitzvah stage of life is like one who has left Egypt. That is good news and bad news, as every adolescent will find out, because, what awaits the youth is a "desert," just like it did the Jewish people who escaped from Paroah.

In Kabbalah, the desert is known as the place of the "Sitra Achra" -- literally, the "Other Side," which, of course, refers to the Suttan (Obstructing Angel), or, yetzer hara. These years, which many say last until the age of thirty, are called the "lustful years." Physiological changes and new-found freedoms "can," according to some parents, "turn sweet children into monsters"!

In many ways, this period of time is the one parents worry the most about in terms of raising children, leaving many a parent wondering if they will survive their children's adolescence. The child is experimenting without even knowing he is experimenting. He is testing limits without even knowing that he is testing limits, all the time wanting so desperately to be trusted, yet, so much of the time acting so untrustworthy!

For some it is so scary, they want to run back to Egypt -- the land of freedom from moral responsibility. Some never fully leave, bringing along strong reminders of what life used to be like in the "good old days." And, it certainly doesn't help to travel through adolescence with the "Mixed Multitude," who, every step along the way, look to trip us up.

Yet, a male teenager, according to the Arizal, has seven years (eight for a Bas Mitzvah) to prepare to reach the level when, at the age of twenty years, he will be able to gain access to the next level of soul, Neshamah. It is this level that is responsible for "Seichel," loosely translated as "discerning intelligence" -- the Sinai-Event of a person's life.

By the looks of it, many adults still struggle to get their Ruach, and, according to Rabbi Chaim Vital, even fewer ever attain Neshamah, and end up getting trapped in the "desert" -- the world of the Sitra Achra, pursuing the whims of their desires, testing G-d over and over again.

The secret to success?

There is no one "secret" to success in raising children and leading them across the "desert" of youth

to the "Promised Land" of adulthood, other than a tremendous amount of help from Heaven, and the maintenance of a spiritual atmosphere. Oh, and a tremendous amount of patience and trust in G-d. These are the concepts underlying the mitzvos of the consecration of the firstborn, and, abstaining of from eating "Chometz" -- the very symbol of the yetzer hara -- for at least one week a year.

As the rabbis teach, had the Jewish people only trusted in G-d the entire time they were in the desert and dependent upon Him completely for survival, then, in spite of all that had gone wrong, they would have emerged on the "other side" of the desert into the Promised Land, and, redemption. But, they doubted G-d's patience, and therefore they doubted their relationship to Him, and, in doing so, cost THEMSELVES that relationship, and permanent redemption.

Our children, too, test us, as we tested our parents. However, chances are that, deep down inside, they'd prefer to know that the relationship with their parents will still be intact when they finally get past this difficult stage of life. And, so do we.

SEUDAH SHLISHI:

"You will tell your son that day, 'This is done because of what G-d did for me when I came out of Egypt.'" (Shemos 13:8)

In the end, this is what it means to "come of age," to become "free." As the mishnah in Pirkei Avos (6:2), freedom comes from doing mitzvos. Mitzvos are mini-crises, designed to make us choose. Children don't want to know from objective morality; they want to know that what they FEEL like having is RIGHT to have.

Growing up is about making sacrifices for the sake of truth, for the sake of THE Truth, for the sake of the Creator -- the Master of the Universe. Freedom is about being free from the whims of the yetzer hara, about being able to discern spiritual drives from physical drives, and doing the right thing ESPECIALLY when it is not necessarily the comfortable thing to do.

In Kabbalah, Paroah was the human manifestation of the Original Snake, representing all the forces within creation designed to distract us, designed to validate our use of free-will by making wrong choices appealing, when in fact, they are really appalling. As the Midrash says, it was the creation of the yetzer hara on Day Six that made G-d comment, "very good," for, without it, free-will would only be a theoretical concept.

Mitzvos force the issue. They impose the concept of Objective Morality upon us, and, at the very least, demand that we search for the truth about life in This World. A "Bar Mitzvah" may simply be a de facto reality related much more to age than level of intelligence, but, a "Ba'al Mitzvah" -- a "Master of Mitzvah" -- is someone who has come to learn, understand, and accept this reality.

It is the hardest thing in the world to sell mankind -- like convincing a ball rolling downhill that it is really rolling uphill, or a dog that the steak in its mouth is really fattening, dangerous to its health, and better off left alone. To do so is to cross a person over the threshold from "Ba'al Tiva" (Slave to Desire) to Bar Da'as (Discerning Person), which, technically, is what a Bar and Bas Mitzvah become.

But once a person is sold, it is a whole different world, and, they become a whole different person. To bear the "yoke" of Heaven is merely to wake up to reality -- the reality of who we are, what we are doing here, and what's in store for us in the future for doing so. It is the test of life. No, it is life ITSELF, as Moshe Rabbeinu will later say:

Now, Israel, what does G-d, your G-d, want from you, except to fear G-d, your G-d, to walk in all His ways, to love Him, to serve G-d your G-d with all your heart and with all your soul; to keep the commandments of G-d and His or-di-nances, which I command you this day, for your own good. (Devarim 10:12-13)

-- on more than one occasion:

Observe: I have set before you today, life and good, death and evil. I command you today to love G-d, your G-d, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His ordinances, and His judgments, so you may live and thrive, and so G-d, your G-d can bless you in the land you will possess. (Devarim 30:15-16)

The Talmud sums it up by saying:

All is in the hands of Heaven except the fear of Heaven. (Brochos 34b)

To integrate this understanding is to succeed at life in This World, and life in the World-to-Come. It is our entire task in This World, for, as the angel said to Ya'akov Avinu, once he successfully fended off the angel, who represented the yetzer hara, the Obstructing Angel, the one whose sole purpose it is to make life challenging for us, and free-will possible:

He told him, "No longer will you be called 'Ya'akov, but 'Yisroel,' for, you have strug-gled with a Heavenly being and have prevailed." (Bereishis 32:29)

To be a Bar Mitzvah, a true "Yisroel," is to know and live with the understanding that the resistance to do mitzvos and maintain spiritual integrity and, in the process, gain true freedom, is not the end of the struggle, but the beginning of it, and that prevailing is to truly leave Egypt, for ALL Jews at ALL times.

MELAVE MALKAH:

For Dovid. Blessed is G-d, my Rock, Who trains my hands for battle and my fingers for war(Tehillim 144:1)

According to the Radak, this was composed after Dovid HaMelech was successful over his enemies and was able to begin his reign of power. However, according to the Midrash Shocher Tov, it was his miraculous victory of Goliath that inspired him to write this psalm. From the beginning, Dovid HaMelech makes it perfectly clear that all Jewish military success is the direct result of Divine Providence.

I remember reading in a history book about the Six-Day War that a non-religious soldier attributed the amazingly quick victory over the Arab nations to superior Israeli firepower, but quickly added that even they noted how they shot better than they were capable of doing. He was implying that a miracle was the cause of their fantastic victory.

My Benefactor, my Fortress, my Stronghold, my own Rescuer, my Shield in Whom I take refuge(2)

This was the whole reason why the Jewish people were forced to the point of "kotzer ruach" -- shortness of breath -- in Egypt, to make these words real to the Jewish people, and, to impress them upon the national psyche. To rely upon ourselves, or, other mortal beings is to reject G-d and our relationship to him.

Who flattens my nation beneath me

Even my internal enemies, that is, those among my own people who wish to render me powerless are themselves rendered powerless when I am devoted to You, and You are devoted to me.

G-d, what is man that You recognize him, the son of a frail human being that you reckon with him? Man is like a breath, his days are like a passing shadow. (3)

What we take for granted Dovid HaMelech found fascinating, and, a reason to be extremely grateful. Does the Master of the Universe have nothing better to do than involve Himself in the affairs of men? Yes, but, still, He involves Himself, guiding history with a loving and wise hand, making sure that, ultimately, good triumphs over evil.

In many synagogues, this prayer is recited just before the Evening Service of Motzei Shabbos, in preparation for the new week. During the hustle and bustle and distraction of every day life, it is very easy to lose the sense of humility that we gained over Shabbos by abstaining from creative activity. This is a reminder just before the new week begins, and, hopefully, a lasting impression can be made that all success belongs to G-d.

It is also an excellent message for the Bar Mitzvah as he enters the world of "I did this with the strength of my own hands. I have made myself successful."

Flash a lightning bolt and scatter them; shoot Your arrows and cause them panic. Stretch out Your hands from Above, release me and rescue me from great waters, from the hand of strangers, whose mouth speaks vanity and whose right hand is a right hand of falsehood. (6-8)

It does not take much for G-d to make His point, nor does it take much for Him to bring redemption,

no matter how great the number of enemies.

For our sons are like saplings, nurtured from their youth, our daughters are like cornerstones crafted in palatial form. (12)

Torah Judaism has specific goals, more than just raising the next generation to financially take care of itself, or, to be able to "melt" into its host society. Torah demands that the Jewish people be a light unto nations, to remain an example of what it means to have been created in the "image of G-d." This is what Chinuch-Banim -- Education of Children -- is supposed to bring out: dedication to maintaining and increasing human dignity.

Happy is the nation with such a lot; happy is the nation whose G-d is Hashem. (15)

This last line is the first line of the "Ashrei prayer" said at Minchah-time, and, the bulk of which follows in the next psalm, number 145. It sums up, perfectly, the need to constantly feel a sense of gratitude for our "lot," which happens to be Hashem.

Paroah asked, "Who is Hashem?" and that was his excuse to ignore the Divine Providence that was systematically destroying his nation. Answering that question -- that He is the one Who saved us from Egyptian bondage, and, Who will bring redemption to us in the end of history -- is what allow Him to systematically build up His nation, the Jewish people.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston
