

EXILE AND REDEMPTION

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d said to Avram, "Go for yourself from your land, from your relatives, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1)

The Jewish nation is no stranger to the concept of exile, as we (anxiously) await the redemption from what is supposed to be our fourth, longest, and final one. Indeed, from the posuk above it seems that, from our beginning, we have been a nation in exile, from the moment that G-d first chose Avraham.

Even though Avraham started his exile thinking that it would end shortly, in truth it did not. Soon, after he arrived in Eretz Canaan and viewed the G-d-given inheritance of his descendants, he was compelled to go to Egypt in search of food because of famine in the land. For the most part, he had troubles - also forms of exile - the rest of his life which never really allowed him to fully experience personal redemption. It has been no different for his billions of descendants over thousands of years.

However, there is exile, and then there is exile, though, in truth, both kinds are meant to achieve the same result. There is national exile, which needs little explanation, and then there is the concept of personal, self-imposed exile, an idea that is known only to the few righteous people who practice it.

One such righteous person was the Vilna Gaon himself, Rabbi Eliyahu ben Shlomo Zalman, born in 1720 in Vilna and often referred to as 'the GR"A' (Gaon Rebi Eliyahu). Many times the GR"A left the privacy of his own intense study and went into self-imposed exile, the first time while in his thirties when he wandered for five years incognito, suffering all the hardships and abuse of being a Jewish wayfarer.

Why such behavior that most of us would shun today?

The Gaon never explained his motives for undertaking a project as troublesome, disturbing, and dangerous as anonymous exile. However, his disciples (in hindsight, some years later) saw in his journey a practical attempt to achieve three main objectives: (a) to expiate his sins by the penance of exile; (b) to discover and publicize unknown great Torah scholars who were isolated and hidden in the small Jewish villages of Eastern Europe, so that the masses of Jewry could benefit from their scholarship and erudition; and (c) to have the opportunity to examine, compare, and study rare manuscripts and books of Torah scholarship, scattered throughout the Jewish communities of

Eastern Europe, in his quest of sources for his redaction of many major texts of Torah and rabbinic literature. In these reasons for his self-imposed exile, Rabbi Eliyahu was able to mirror in his own private life the unique, purposeful experience of Israel in its long national exile. For the Jew had always seen in the exile not only punishment for sin and expiation, but also the opportunity to prove conclusively that millions of people could live a holy and pious life for centuries even under the most abject circumstances, and that great contributions to education, scholarship, civilization and the quality of human life could stem from a transient and persecuted minority. (Triumph of Survival, p. 104-05)

If reasons two and three are indeed correct, then they were personal to the Vilna Gaon himself, and certainly not reasons for Avraham's personal exile from Charan. Even the first reason cited above doesn't quite hit the mark in terms of understanding the value of Avraham's exile, and thus it is important to learn another perspective regarding the GR"A's reasoning for self-imposed exile.

SHABBOS DAY:

G-d said to Avram, "Go for yourself . . . to the land that I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1)

Regarding the exiles of the GR"A, it says elsewhere:

It has been said that our rabbi, the GR"A, traveled from place to place to put himself into exile, but it has not been sufficiently explained. The main objective of our rabbi, the GR"A, was to check on what his people were doing and how they were behaving morally. As our rabbi wrote, man was created to break his evil traits, and to rectify himself and others in accord with the holy Torah. Indeed, wherever our rabbi went, he did not reveal himself to anyone, but hid his identity so that he would appear as a simple Jew. However, before leaving a place, he would reveal something about himself to the Rabbi of the community and to special people in the place. He would encourage them to correct whatever was weak in that particular community regarding traits, Torah, or good deeds. (Kol HaTor, 3:12)

Thus, according to the GR"A, man was only created in order to work on his negative character traits, in order to rectify them. Everything else we do or experience is just to help us gain mastery over our minds and emotions in order to allow us to perfect ourselves in the image of G-d in which we are created.

To this end, the GR"A imposed exile upon himself, because nothing interferes with self-improvement more than living within a familiar environment. In a familiar environment, we learn to accept others and ourselves, reducing the need for personal change. Therefore, nothing brings our weaknesses to the surface more than a change of habit and habitat, both of which demand new heights of personal self-control and self-examination.

Thus, Avraham's exile from Charan was not only the result of a physical reality of having to travel from one place to another, but it was a necessary part of his own personal development on his journey to personal redemption. Indeed, this is why the Torah does not merely say,

G-d said to Avram, "Go for yourself . . . to the land that I will show you." (Bereishis 12:1)

but instead, adds the words:

. . . from your relatives, and from your father's house . . .

For, Avraham was not merely traveling to Eretz Canaan, but rather, he was going into personal exile, leaving behind the comforts of a familiar land and close family. In fact, he was not only being asked to PHYSICALLY leave his land and family behind, he was also being asked to do so INTELLECTUALLY and EMOTIONALLY, as a necessary prerequisite to be able to accept the gift of Eretz Yisroel.

This is because there are two 'states' of Eretz Yisroel, the physical one and the spiritual one, and each corresponds to a different state of mind in the Jew. That is why Eretz Yisroel is "the land that I will show you," because one cannot arrive at the spiritual Eretz Yisroel by simply boarding a boat or plane and arriving there PHYSICALLY, that is, without first arriving there SPIRITUALLY, something indicated by the words 'Lech-lecha':

LECH-LECHA: 'Lech-lecha' hinted to him that he would be 100 years old, the numerical value of 'lech-lecha,' when [the promise of] "I will make you into a great nation" [would be fulfilled,] when Yitzchak was born. (Ba'al HaTurim, Bereishis 12:1)

Knowing this, we can now understand the GR"A's second motivation for sacrificing his own learning time to go into personal exile amongst his people in far away lands.

SEUDOS SHILSHIS:

The fourth generation shall return here . . . (Bereishis 15:16)

Everything in the Torah is also symbolic, and all that happened to our fathers is a sign of what will happen to their children, that is, the generations to follow until the end of time. The posuk itself refers to the generation of Jews that left Mitzrayim under Moshe Rabbeinu's leadership, but maybe it is an allusion to the generation of Jews at the end of this FOURTH exile as well.

Regardless, the GR"A already felt the time to be redeemed was at hand even in his time. Thus:

. . . Along with this (trying to improve the spiritual quality of life of Jewish communities throughout Eastern Europe), he would stir up the people in connection with preparing for the ingathering of the exiles with many explanations, because "You will arise and show Tzion mercy, for the time to favor her, for the appointed time will have come" (Tehillim 102:-14). (Kol HaTor, 3:12)

And BECAUSE of this, the GR"A went into personal exile to enhance the spiritual level of his fellow Jews, in an effort to prepare them for the redemption and to return to Eretz Yisroel. Just as the Gaon used exile as a way to break his negative character traits, he tried to teach his fellow Jews how to use exile in the same way, for only then can exile give way to redemption, personal AND national.

It was not an easy task, and as difficult as life may have been for the majority of the Jews of Europe at that time, it was still more FAMILIAR and therefore more COMFORTABLE than leaving for a land that was desolate and dangerous. How much more so today for an American living in the most civilized, free, and opportune country, when the alternative being offered is a tiny country with large security and financial problems.

Yes, "Ma'aseh Avos, siman l'banim" - the "actions of the fathers and signs for the children" - tells us that the words of the first posuk of this week's parshah were not a one-time event. Rather, "Lech-lecha" is a clue for all future generations of Jews: exile from familiar surroundings can help one to break those negative character traits that interfere with one's appreciation of that which makes personal, and even national redemption a reality. This is even truer when the place one is going to exile themselves to is itself Eretz Yisroel, the land that G-d has designated as the place of the greatest spiritual opportunity for the Jew.

The final personal exile that the GR"A went into was on his way to Eretz Yisroel. In the end, he had to turn back and didn't make it to the land he cherished, according to some because of physical hardship. However, according to Kol HaTor, the implication is that the time was not right for his arrival, because the Jewish people did not merit his arriving there, as in the days of Moshe Rabbeinu's time. For, as has been the case so many times throughout our long and embittered history, the Jewish people had a leader, but one who lacked those willing to be led.

MELAVE MALKAH:

PART TWO: The Ultimate Historical Process

What is the halachah if a Jew, wanting a fruit, has before him a bowl containing a mixture of both good and bad apples? The answer is, it depends if the day is Shabbos or not. If it is a weekday, he may do as he pleases. However, if the day is Shabbos, and he removes the bad apples to leave behind a bowl of only good apples, then he is chaiv - culpable for having broken Shabbos, just as he would be had he turned on a light on Shabbos.

What offence did the person commit? According to the mishnah in Meseches Shabbos (Chapter 7), he performed the seventh melachah called 'Borrer,' that is, 'separation,' or 'selection.'

As the Talmud teaches, there are 39 Principle Activities (Melachos) that were used by Moshe Rabbeinu and his specially appointed crew to construct the Mishkan and its implement at the base of Mt. Sinai in the first year after leaving Egypt. Since Shabbos took precedence over the construction of the Mishkan, the Oral Tradition teaches that this is the basis of determining what is forbidden and permissible to do on Shabbos. (Bava Kamma 2a)

A central activity of the Mishkan was the offering of sacrifices, and some sacrifices also included bread or products made from wheat. The actual process of refining wheat, as prescribed by the Torah, involved separation of the desired parts from the less desirable parts. As a result, borrar is

one of the 39 forbidden creative activities on Shabbos.

Thus, it does not matter that performing an act of borror requires little if any effort at all. Having been designated a Shabbos melachah, an actual transgression performed with intention for the creative result and before witnesses will result in the death penalty, without witnesses, in being cut off from the Jewish people (kores), and accidentally, in the need to bring a Sin-Offering during Temple times.

However, unlike the other 38 forbidden creative activities of Shabbos, borror has an added dimension that makes its severity with respect to Shabbos quite understandable. For, if one of the main objectives of Shabbos is to have the Jew, once a week, withdraw from dominating creation in order to appreciate his subservience to and dependence upon God, then abstaining from borror becomes imperative. For, according to Kabbalah, borror is the MAIN objective of ALL that man does during the other six days of the week.

At first, this idea comes as a surprise to anyone who is unfamiliar with the Kabbalistic understanding of how creation came into being, and the true role of man within creation. However, understanding this process not only puts the melachah of borror in the proper perspective, but it helps to put all the pieces of history into the proper context.

The beginning of this understanding, in terms of the written Torah, is alluded to in the first two verses:

In the beginning, God created Heaven and Earth. The Earth was null (tohu) . . . (Bereishis 1:1-2)

On a simple level, these verses are interpreted to mean that, just prior to the first verse, nothing existed, other than God Himself. When He Himself determined that creation should come into being, He merely willed it, and Heaven and Earth came into being yaish m'ayin - ex nihilo.

However, as the second verse indicates and Pirkei Avos emphasizes (5:1), God did not make a finished creation in one moment. Instead, He created all the matter necessary for all of history at the first moment, and then developed creation on a daily basis over the course of one week, through nine additional utterances and expressions of His perfect will.

Whatever did not exist during the first days of creation has come into being over the course of the millennia, yaish m'yaish - something from something. Since the first moment of creation, creation has been a matter of bringing into actuality what already existed in potential, making man a 'yotzer' (someone who creates from existing material), unlike God who is both a 'Borei' (a creator of something from nothing), and a Yotzer.

Do we need to know anything more?

Only if you want to become a FULL partner with God in creation.

To be continued . . .

Have a great Shabbos,
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