

TALKING ABOUT REDEMPTION . . .

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

FRIDAY NIGHT:

G-d spoke to Moshe saying, "This is the law of the metzora on the day of his purification . . ." (Vayikra 14:1-2)

This Shabbos is the Shabbos before Pesach - "Shabbos HaGadol." It is the Shabbos that the Jewish People, 3,315 years ago, took the symbol of Egyptian idol worship - the lamb - and tied it to their bedposts in advance of using it as the Korban Pesach. It was a momentous move on their part, and an important preparation for meriting redemption from Egypt.

This week's parshah, on the other hand, is about the purification process of the metzora, the individual who developed a form of leprosy for spiritual reasons, but not for physical reasons:

The Kohen will command the one to be purified to take two living birds . . . (Ibid. 4)

LIVING BIRDS: Because the plagues [of tzora'as] come as a punishment for slander, which is done by chattering, therefore birds are obligatory for his purification, because these "chatter" continuously with a chirping sound (Arachin 16b). (Rashi)

Seemingly, there is little connection between this week's parshah and Pesach, other than the fact that we were redeemed to keep all the mitzvos, one of which is the purification process of the metzora. I mean, what connection can there possibly be between individuals who can't control their tongues to a holiday that celebrates the natural birthday of the Jewish nation?

It's a good question, until we recall that Pesach is the holiday that celebrates the redemption of the mouth. That's right, the redemption of the MOUTH. True, it was the entire body of the Jew that suffered in Egypt and consequently, went out of Egyptian bondage after the tenth and final plague. However, it was the Jewish mouth specifically that had been bound and gagged in Egypt, so to speak, and which needed freedom the most.

Why else would it be called "Pesach," which means: mouth that spoke (peh sach; Maharal). And also, why would the central part of the celebration be the recital of the Haggadah, which itself means "to tell," an obligation upon the individual even if he is alone Seder Night.

After all, the Seder reminds us about our miraculous redemption from the grasp of Pharaoh, whose Hebrew name means "evil mouth" (peh ra'a) when the "peh" is written as it sounds. The Torah's name for Egypt, "Mitzrayim," itself is composed of two words - meitzer yum (Sha'arei Leshem, p. 404) -

the first one meaning "constriction" and the second one being a gematria equal to 50 (yud-mem). As the Pri Tzaddik says, the ORAL Law, which is what distinguishes the Jewish People from the nations of the world, is rooted in the FIFTY Gates of Understanding (Purim, 2).

And, it was a redemption by a leader whose one drawback was in the area of speech:

Moshe answered G-d: "Please, my L-rd, I am not a man of words, not since yesterday, nor since the day before yesterday, nor since You first spoke to Your servant, for I am heavy of mouth and heavy of speech." (Shemos 4:10)

A leader who almost died on his way to perform his mission of redemption, all because he delayed performing Bris Milah - literally, "Covenant of the Word" - to his son (Shemos 4:24). A leader who finally brought his people to freedom specifically from a place called "Pi HaChiros" - "Mouth of Redemption" (Shemos 14:2).

It is a fitting end to an era of slavery that included labors of crushing harshness that the Torah calls "b'pharech" (Shemos 1:14), but which (one opinion in) the Talmud interprets to mean, "peh rach," with a "soft mouth" (Sotah 11b).

All of a sudden, this week's parshah has EVERYTHING to do with preparing ourselves for the redemptive power of Pesach.

SHABBOS DAY:

G-d formed man from dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils a living soul, and the man became a living spirit. (Bereishis 2:7)

To appreciate the connection, you have to first appreciate speech. Talk may be "cheap" and easy, but that should not detract from its tremendous spiritual importance. As Targum Onkeles reveals, it is the very symbol of a G-dliness:

A LIVING SPIRIT: A speaking spirit. (Onkeles)

Thus, our ability to speak is really a function of the soul that G-d breathes into man, making it a spiritual ability, though it takes advantage of a physical mouth. In fact, so spiritual is speech that every time we say something, our words create an angel, good ones from the meaningful things we say, and bad ones from our abuse of speech - both of which are present on our final day of judgment.

Thus, the Talmud's statement no longer seems so unusual:

R' Elazar said: Every man was created to toil, as it says, "Because man was made to toil" (Iyov 5:7). Now, I do not know if that means to toil through speech, or in actual labor; however, once it says, "A toiling soul toils for him, for his mouth compels him." (Mishlei 16:26), I know that a person was created to toil with his mouth. I do not know, though, if this means to toil in Torah or just in regular

conversation. However, once it says, "This Torah should not leave your mouth" (Yehoshua 1: 8), I know that man was created to toil in Torah [through speech]. (Sanhedrin 99b)

- Nor its admonishments:

Rava said: Anyone who speaks of non-holy matters (Rashi: childishly and light-headedly) has transgressed a positive commandment, as it says, "And speak of them" (Devarim 6:7) - them (Rashi: words of Torah), and not other words. (Yoma 19b)

Anyone who speaks distastefully will earn a negative decree from Heaven, even if they have seventy years of merits in their favor. (Kesuvos 8b)

In fact, according to Kabbalah, there are four spiritual realities that make up creation, kind of like a spiritual food chain. At the bottom, there is the mineral world called "Domaim," which means "silent" because it can't speak. Then comes the vegetation world, which is called "Tzomayach" - flora, after which comes the animal world, "Chiyah" - living.

The final and crowning level of the four is that of man. What is this level called? What characteristic best distinguishes him from the other levels that it should become his label? Medabehr - "speaker" is the name given to the level of man, just as Onkeles told us in his commentary on the posuk, and the man became a living spirit.

No wonder G-d took us out of Egypt into the "midbar" - spelled the exact same way as "medabehr": mem-dalet-bais-raish - to prepare us for a holy life in Eretz Yisroel. And, no wonder that the punishment and rectification for SLANDERING Eretz Yisroel was an additional 39 years of wandering in that midbar - a lesson for Jews for all time, especially today as history comes to a close, and 6,000,000 Jews live in America, a country referred to as a "midbar" by earlier generations.

And, lest we forget, it was because Moshe HIT the rock to bring forth water, as opposed to SPEAKING to it, that he and Aharon HaKohen were denied entry into the land of their dreams, Eretz Yisroel. They too died, in the midbar.

Perhaps this is the deeper meaning of the following:

If you make yourself into a desert (midbar), then your Torah will remain. (Eiruvin 54a)

On a Pshat-level, the Torah is stressing the importance of humility in learning and maintaining Torah understanding. However, based upon what we have said until now, it may also mean that only by becoming a "Medabehr" does Torah flow from a person and remain with him. For:

The Holy One, Blessed is He, only made a covenant with Israel because of the "Oral Things," as it says, "For it is according to these words that I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" (Shemos 34:27). (Gittin 60b)

The question is, what does it mean to become a Medabehr? Obviously, the opposite of what it

means to become a metzora, as we shall now discuss, b'ezras Hashem.

SEUDOS SHILSHIS:

And as for Me, this is My covenant with them, G-d said, My spirit which is upon you and My words that I have placed in your mouth will not be withdrawn from your mouth nor from the mouth of your offspring nor from the mouth of your offspring's offspring, said G-d, for this moment and forever." (Yeshayahu 59:21)

These beautiful words by the prophet provide the crucial key. According to Rashi, they are a promise that no matter how difficult exile becomes, Torah will never be forgotten from the Jewish people. However, they also explain why this is the case.

Remembering Torah is not just a function of diligent study and constant review, as the Talmud itself points out (Megillah 6b). It is the result of, to borrow the prophet's own words, "the spirit which is upon you," the result of G-d placing HIS words into OUR mouths.

Therefore, this is what it truly means to become a Medabehr. A Medabehr is not merely one who daily exercises his jaws by speaking anything that flows from his mouth, regardless of its quality of content. Certainly abusive speech results in just the opposite.

Rather, a Medabehr is one who has purified and sanctified himself sufficiently so that G-d's spirit can rest upon him, in order that G-d's words can flow through the person's mouth. In other words, the goal of life is to become a "mouth-piece," so-to-speak, for Heaven, as Moshe Rabbeinu himself was, each on his own level.

This is true whether the message is expressed verbally, in writing, or in action, for as we all know, sometimes "actions can speak louder than words."

The metzora, on the other hand, has done just the opposite. By speaking slander about someone, he has not spoken on behalf of G-d (unless his particular message was for the sake of Heaven, and therefore sanctioned by the Torah). The very fact that he has slandered is evidence that the Divine Presence is distant from him, and that he is impure, as the previous parshah said he is forced to proclaim about himself.

In fact, the word "metzora" itself also contains the letters, mem-tzaddi-raish, the first three letters of Mitzrayim that mean "constriction." In a very real sense, the metzora represents enslaved life in Egypt, what we became as a result of working "b'pharech," and what we were redeemed to change.

Eretz Yisroel, on the other hand, represents just the opposite. That is why it is often compared to a mouth, "spitting out" its inhabitants as one would distasteful food:

Do not defile yourselves in any of these ways . . . so that the land will not vomit you out because of your own defilement, as it has rejected the nations before you. (Vayikra 18:24-28)

Rather than G-d punish the spies by keeping them out of the land, the "mouth" of Eretz Yisroel would not let them enter, especially since:

The goal of inheriting a portion of Eretz Yisroel has been to help each Jew find his own portion within Torah Sh'b'al Peh. (Zohar Chadash 2:137b)

The essence of the Oral Law is within [Eretz Yisroel]. (Pri Tzaddik, Parashas Massey 4)

Thus, prophecy, for the most part, has only been possible inside Eretz Yisroel. And, the rabbis taught:

The air of Eretz Yisroel makes a person wise. (Bava Basra 158b)

For, it is the only true place to help a person transform himself into the type of vessel upon which the Shechinah can dwell and through whom It can speak. This is true Geulas Mitzrayim.

MELAVE MALKAH:

You have wearied G-d with your words, but you say, "How have we wearied Him?" By your saying, "Everyone who does wrong is good in the eyes of G-d, and He favors them; or else where is the G-d of justice?" (Malachi 2:17)

Though the special Haftarah for Shabbos HaGadol does not begin until four verses down, this paragraph is its introduction, which Rashi explains as follows:

HE FAVORS THEM: You see that wicked people prosper and you conclude that either G-d loves the wicked, or there is no justice in the world. (Rashi)

This doesn't necessarily mean that we walk around all day questioning Divine justice with words. It also means that our attitudes towards Torah and mitzvos, towards others, towards world politics, etc., indicate that this is where our hearts are holding. We may believe in Divine justice in theory, but in practice, we act as if the cat is on vacation.

To this, G-d responds:

Behold, I am sending My messenger, and he will clear a path before Me; suddenly the L-rd Whom you seek will come to His Sanctuary, and the messenger of the covenant for whom you yearn, behold, he comes, says G-d, Master of Legions. Who can bear the day of his coming and who can survive when he appears? For he will be like the smelter's fire and like the launderer's soap. He will sit smelting and purifying silver; he will purify the children of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will be for G-d presenters of offerings in righteousness. (Ibid. 3:1-3)

In other words, the truth cometh. The days, NO, the millennia of upside-downness are coming to an end. The time of reckoning approaches. Call it what you will, but they all mean the same thing: evil must go, its party must come to an end.

One of the reasons why we read this Haftarah now, in advance of Pesach, is because it was the

message of Yetzias Mitzrayim. Redemption from Egypt was not only about the freeing of the Jewish people, it was also about the obliteration of the evilest and mightiest nation on the face of the earth at that time, SUPERNATURALLY.

It says in the Haftarah itself:

Since the days of your forefathers you have veered away from My laws and you have not observed them. (Ibid. 7)

This is tantamount to saying that we didn't get it. We witnessed it first hand, and then we ignored what we learned, that falsehood has a short life expectancy. Straying from Torah and mitzvos means abandonment of truth and capitulation to fabrication and deceit, the very essence of Egyptian society.

"Return to Me and I will return to You!" says G-d, Master of Legions; but you say, 'For what should we repent?' " (Ibid.)

Funny you should ask. So, answers the prophet:

"For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the wicked people and all the evildoers will be like straw; and that coming day will burn them up," says G-d, Master of Legions, "so that it will not leave them a root or branch." (Ibid. 19)

Yikes. Now for the good news:

"But a sun of righteousness will shine for you who fear My Name, with healing in its rays . . . And you will trample the wicked, for they will be like ashes under the soles of your feet, on that day that I will bring about," says G-d, Master of Legions." (Ibid. 20-21)

As the Pri Tzaddik says (VaAira), the Ten Plagues in Egypt had a dual effect. As they physically crushed the Egyptians, they spiritually healed the Jewish people - at least those of the Jewish people who knew they needed healing. The other FOUR-FIFTHS died in the Plague of Darkness.

"Remember the Torah of Moshe My servant, which I commanded him at Chorev for all of Israel - decrees and statutes." (Ibid 22)

And do it quick, now that Pesach is coming and the world is teetering on the brink of chaos, for:

"Behold, I send you Eliyahu the prophet before the coming of the great and awesome day of G-d. And he will turn back [to G-d] the hearts of the fathers with [their] sons and the hearts of the sons with their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with utter destruction." (Ibid. 23)

It's worth repeating, and we do when reading the Haftarah. Especially with 300,000 foreign troops fighting a war around the corner from us, with a mandate to "tidy" up our end of the world as soon as they finish tidying up that one. With 300,000,000 Arabs, and hosts of other nations watching on to make sure that they do it with the same amount of zeal.

Have a GREAT Shabbos, and a Chag Kosher v'Samayach. May there be peace on all of Klal Yisroel, and may the Name of Hashem Yisborach be apparent to all so that Truth can finally reign supreme, and evil will be completely gone from the world, once and for all.

Have a great Shabbos,
Pinchas Winston

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