

THE GREATEST DIG OF ALL

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

This week's parshah sheet is dedicated to Yerachmiel Don ben Tzipora Chana (amush). May the merit of the reading and sharing of this week's parshah sheet provide him with a refuah shlaimah immediately.

FRIDAY NIGHT:

It was at the end of four hundred and thirty years, and it was on that very day that all of the legions of G-d left the land of Egypt. (Shemos 12:41)

I happened to be away for Shabbos, and Motzei Shabbos I picked up a section of what I had assumed was from the previous week's Jerusalem Post lying around where I was staying. Amazingly, it did not occur to me, though I had already read several articles, that the news I was reading was nine months old, especially since one particular section was about the parshah we just read that Shabbos, Shemos.

The headline read something to the effect, "Rabbi Denies Exodus Occurred." At first thought, I had assumed that the article had been prompted by a return to the story of the Exodus in the upcoming parshios. Only after I was well into the article did I realize that it was from the previous Pesach, at which point I looked up at the top of the page and saw the date of publication: April 16, 2003.

I had to laugh, partly because of how I had been duped, and partly because of the incredible timing of the mistake. There I was, preparing to write about Parashas Bo (I write a week in advance of the parshah), and here was this article was about some Reform rabbi speaking his mind about the lack of archeological evidence to support the Exodus story.

I read the article and the counterpoints. However, what I didn't quite understand was why this person's statement was considered such a departure from Reform Judaism's way of thinking. If they don't accept our fundamental belief that G-d gave the Torah to the Jewish people at Mt. Sinai in the year 2448 from Creation, and they don't accept the Oral tradition that has been handed down from generation to generation, then how could it be assumed that they accepted the account of the Exodus in the Torah?

Anyhow, the gist of the article was this: If the Exodus from Egypt occurred as the Torah says, then why isn't there sufficient archeological evidence to support such an account? Shouldn't there be some archeological trace of the Jewish people having been in Egypt for hundreds of years [A comment from an editor: There is and I saw it. In the Valley of the Kings there is a rock in front of Pharoh's tomb with writing carved on it that says something to the effect that the Hebrews gave him

a lot of trouble and they left on such and such date, and there was "not one of the seed of Ya'akov left in the land of Egypt.]", and of their miraculous departure from Egypt and their journeys in the Sinai Desert?

True, Josephus wrote about it in his time as it was well-known that there was such a miraculous Exodus from Egypt by the Jewish people, a fact that some were trying to purge in his time. And true, Vilokovsky found papyrus remains in some museum in the Netherlands that describes the systematic destruction of Egypt by one "natural" disaster after another. There are other historical details that only make sense in the context of the Exodus account, but we'll leave those for now since that is not the point of this essay.

Not good enough. The man wants a significant archeological find. He wants hard core indisputable PHYSICAL evidence that the Jewish people were in Egypt, were enslaved, left there because of great miracles and signs wrought by G-d through some messenger. Prove all that, and then . . . and then . . . and then what? He'll believe?

You have to admit, it would be convenient if we could dig up something that said, "Yes, the Jews were here and passed by on their miraculous return to Eretz Canaan. Oh, you should have seen the looks on the Egyptians' faces when Aharon turned the Nile river to blood. And that plague of darkness . . . had them pinned to their seats or stuck standing up while the Jews made good on hundreds of years of forced labor. However, even the Plague of the Firstborn (you should have heard those Egyptians screaming!) did not compare to the way the Egyptians were tossed to and fro by the waters of the Red Sea, as the Jews looked on with awe from the other side, safe and sound."

Wouldn't that be nice? Believing in the Exodus then would clearly be a no-brainer, as easy as believing that the police give us tickets for running red lights. No need for faith here.

SHABBOS DAY:

I am Hashem, your G-d, Who has taken you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery. (Shemos 20:2)

In Parashas Yisro, we will read about the Ten Commandments, the first of which introduces the Jewish people to G-d. It is an interesting definition of the Jewish G-d. He could have said, "I am G-d Who made Creation and everything in it, including you. I give life and take it away, so get with the program (i.e., Torah) and you will be allowed to live." Could anyone argue with that line of reasoning?

However, the fact that G-d made Creation and runs it seems to be secondary to the fact that He freed us from Egyptian bondage. It's as if the unique relationship we enjoy with the Almighty is predicated on our belief that He stepped into history on our behalf and took us out of Egypt. Belief in the Exodus and belief in the unique relationship is one and the same thing.

Not only is belief in the Exodus crucial, but:

The Sefer Mitzvos HaKatan wrote in his explanation of the Positive Mitzvah of, "I am G-d, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt," that it means one must know that, He Who created Heaven and Earth alone controls [the world] above and below. However, to this he added, "This [mitzvah] is the basis for what the rabbis teach: At the time of a person's judgment after death, they ask him, 'Did you anticipate redemption?' (Shabbos 31a). Where is this mitzvah written? Actually, it comes from this [same mitzvah], for just as, 'I am G-d, your G-d, Who took you out of Egypt,' means that we are expected to believe that G-d redeemed us from Egypt, and it also means, 'Just as I want you to believe that I took you out [from Egypt], I also want you to believe that I, G-d, your G-d, will gather you in and redeem you in mercy a second time'." According to what he (Sefer Mitzvos HaKatan) has said, belief in the future redemption is part of our faith in, "I am G-d, your G-d," and thus is the first of the Ten Commandments . . . (Ohr Yechezkel, Emunas HaGeulah, 1960; p. 287)

Thus, belief in G-d is intimately bound up with the concept of the first redemption from Egypt, and also the Final Redemption for which we now await. And, the implication can be understood from two directions:

1. If you already believe that the Exodus occurred as the Torah says and as you should, then you must know that just as it occurred, so too will the Final Redemption occur. Have faith.
2. If you have difficulty believing in the first Exodus, then know that just as it takes faith to belief in an Exodus that has yet to occur, in some cases it takes faith to believe in an Exodus that HAS occurred. And, just as belief in G-d means believing in something you can't see, then so must you believe in redemptions you did not and have not yet seen.

In other words, by having belief in G-d and the Exodus from Egypt, according to the Sefer Mitzvos HaKatan, the Torah is making a comparison between these two mitzvos and belief in the Final Redemption. The reason is quite basic: each is proof of the other, and none of them rely upon physical evidence.

On the contrary, when listing the Positive and Negative Mitzvos in Hilchos Yesodei HaTorah, the Rambam says that there is a mitzvah "to know there is a G-d." - to know and not just to have faith. This means that there must exist an intellectual path that one can and must follow at the end of which is belief in G-d, that is, enough knowledge that one can say, "Yes, there MUST be a G-d and Torah must be His knowledge and instructions for mankind." With the exception of a few times in history, belief in G-d is the reward one receives for having sought Him out, as the Talmud says:

All is in the hands of Heaven except for the fear of Heaven. (Brochos 33b).

As we have said on so many occasions before, the Hebrew word for fear and seeing are the same: yireh. This is because one can't fear that which one can't see, either physically or mentally. In order to be able to fear G-d, that is, take Him and His Torah seriously, one has to first know that He is there. Knowing that He is there and what He wants from us makes belief in the Exodus quite basic. Rabbi Yehudah HaLevi made this clear to the King of Kuzar, who converted his kingdom to Judaism as a

result.

And the King of Kuzar would have done so regardless of the lack of archeological evidence to support the psychological and historical proof.

SEUDOS SHLISHIS:

I happened on that very day: G-d took the Children of Israel out of the land of Egypt, in their legions. (Shemos 12:51)

I had always thought that religion was the opium of the masses, something that one turned to when they couldn't hack living in the secular world. Born into a conservative to reform family, my limited Jewish education didn't allow for belief in much more than that. Torah, whatever it was, was archaic and just a sentimental link to a Jewish past that was obviously in the process of giving way to a far more clever and sophisticated Western secular society. Or so I had thought some 25 years ago.

I wish I could take credit for having taught myself otherwise, but it is not so. A set of circumstances I certainly did not count on brought me to a different level of exposure to Torah, and fortunately, in spite of myself, my mind was open enough to see that Torah was something far more special than it appears on the outside, to an outsider. To this very day, Shabbos remains to be one of the most sublime entry points for any secular Jew into the world of Torah.

Being young enough (and single), I was able to pursue this path with a single-mindedness and devotion I had rarely applied to anything secular. It was not that I did not try hard in university, at work, or in sports; I did. It is just that people apply themselves to what they are doing based upon their ability to see the worthiness of doing so, and once having bitten into Torah, I found myself driven to go farther, and farther, faster and faster.

When I finally left Toronto to attend a yeshivah in Jerusalem's Old City, it was because I had felt as if I had outgrown the local resources. I had gone to the Middle East on a different kind of historical dig, one that took me deeper and deeper into the well-springs of Torah. Taking on mitzvos was the end result of a long process of research that demanded that I follow through physically with what I had come to understand intellectually; they were what I had uncovered upon excavating the Torah perspective on man and life in this world.

This does not mean that my body did not rebel along the way. Often it did every step along the way. However, as I moved from the simple but beautiful wisdom of Pirkei Avos to in-depth Chumash study, and then to Mishnah, and finally Gemora, resistance became less logical as information entered my mind and organized itself into a far more profound and logical picture of life than I knew existed elsewhere. My body was like a stallion broken in by a benevolent trainer who only wishes to channel its energies.

Did I believe in the Exodus story as told in the Torah? The year before, not really. The year after, completely. Now, 25 years later, beyond a shadow of a doubt, which in Hebrew is the word "suffek,"

which has the same gematria of the Name Amalek. For, it is Amalek's job to confuse the Jewish people, to make them doubt G-d and Torah, and to try and convince them that the Exodus never took place.

I never tried to prove the Exodus story to myself, and I never tried to convince myself that Torah was from G-d. Indeed, I spent more time trying to do just the opposite. I simply learned and built up my base of Torah knowledge until the realities just seemed to follow. The knowledge itself demanded the belief.

Once, during a teaching session about belief in a particular Torah concept, a certain (adult) student challenged me in a somewhat argumentative tone, "Yeah, why do you believe what you do?" hoping that I would respond with some sort of blind faith answer that they could then attack, which probably would have had a dramatic negative impact on the other students as well.

As I prepared to answer the question, I asked myself, "How do I share years of research and learning with a group of people in five minutes, and expect them to hear the answer and appreciate it on the same level that I do now?"

And that was my answer, "If you knew what I now know, you would believe it to."

MELAVE MALKAH:

And it shall be when your son will ask you at some future time, "What is this?" you shall say to him, "With a strong hand G-d removed us from Egypt from the house of bondage." (Shemos 13:14)

To this very day, I'm not sure where that answer came from, other than from Heaven itself. But it was one of the most effective answers I have ever given, for not only did it disarm the questioner, it said in a few words what I could not have said in a hour's time. It told them that all I was teaching was the product of years of in-depth Torah learning, and that my belief was a function of knowledge, not merely faith. It also told them that all that stands between them and such a solid belief was not what they thought they knew, but what they had yet to learn.

How do you argue a point like that?

But this is not a game. It is about beliefs, about the pursuit of truth, about connecting up with the G-d of Creation before He loses His patience and cuts us off altogether. Here was a man who calls himself a rabbi, prepared to rely upon an inaccurate and certainly incomplete science to put to death a belief system that the entire world requires to exist.

Had the man said, "I have studied Torah with Rashi and all the other major commentaries and super-commentaries. I have delved into the Mishnah, all of them, and understand their meaning and intentions. I have learned Talmud, not just one tractate, but the entire Talmud, both the Babylonian and the Jerusalem versions, and their ingenious commentaries, and have a good handle on the big picture they create. I have seen the many midrashim and have spent many years in the realm of

Kabbalah. In short, I have seen all of Torah, at least as much as we have in our hands today, and quite frankly, I am not impressed. In truth, it is incoherent, and reveals no particular genius any more than that which any other intelligent society might have produced over time, let's say in 2000 years. Little of it compels me, after my many years of sincere research on all four levels, Pshat, Remez, Drush, and Sod, to believe in what it has written as actual fact. Therefore, it does not surprise me that archeological evidence has yet to surface support of its historical account."

Had he done this and said this, then maybe there would be what to listen to, what to take seriously. But he didn't, and, he couldn't. Because, had he worked this approach to the story of the Exodus, his question would be on the archeologists and their supporters, not on Torah and its supporters.

Questions? Of course there are, many indeed. We still haven't confirmed why the earth is pock marked with huge craters though no sign of large asteroids remain for us as proof that they did the dirty work. We have theories but still lack facts. Stonehenge is still a mystery as well. Heck, we're still looking for life in outer space though most of the signs indicate there is none. But we'll spend billions of dollars to prove otherwise, because our belief is so strong that we can't be the only ones alive in this vast and awesome universe, and no one says boo.

Questions are good. A little bit of doubt can be healthy, as long as it forces you to answer it to pursue deeper levels of truth. They are necessary for faith, and to drive a person to seek out truth through his mind, not just his eyes. The Greeks lived by the belief that seeing is believing, but Chanukah came along and taught us that believing is seeing too. Indeed, as the Leshem points out, the Primordial Light that G-d hid on the first day of Creation was only hidden from the evil of history, that is, those people who choose to lead with their eyes, and not with their minds.

Without that light, everyday life is just that - everyday, mundane life. Then the saying, "what you see is what you get," is true. But for the person who pursues Torah with the goal of getting to the bottom of it all, this light reveals that which is hidden from most of the physical world by the majority of the world. The four-fifths of the Jews who died in this week's parshah in the Plague of Darkness did so because they also didn't believe in the Exodus from Egypt as told by the Torah.

As the Sefer Mitzvos HaKatan and the Talmud both imply, it will be quite the same just prior to the Final Redemption. And the April 16, 2003 edition of The Jerusalem Post reverberated with just how true both of them were in their predictions.

Have a great Shabbos,
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Text

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