

LEAVING MITZRAYIM AND ITS SPIRITUAL REALM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

At the end of the 430 years, on precisely that day, all the hosts of God went out from Egypt. (Shemos 12:41)

LEAVING MITZRAYIM IS NOT EASY. Indeed, it is far easier to leave Egypt than it is to leave Mitzrayim. Jews have come to and gone from Egypt for thousands of years now, but they have barely left Mitzrayim, if at all. In fact, every day of our lives we are trying to do exactly that, whether we are aware of it or not.

You thought they were the same place? Once they were, in Moshe Rabbeinu's time. However, though Egypt has stayed where it was since that time, Mitzrayim has moved around and spread out. Now, it is possible to be as far away from North Africa as America, and still be in Mitzrayim, in a big way.

This is because Mitzrayim is a spiritual reality, while Egypt is a physical one, and though they can overlap, they don't have to. For, though Egypt is defined by its geographical borders, Mitzrayim is defined by conceptual borders, and if you don't know what they are, then you can "live" there and not even know it. And, to live there and not know it is to be stuck there.

This is why the Haggadah tells us each year to look at ourselves as if we too left Mitzrayim, because that is what we must do. Therefore, the Haggadah is really telling us to make a point of understanding what Mitzrayim is, so that we can recognize it for what it is, and escape it. Amazingly, so few Jews do, and as a result, so few Jews have.

Where to start? Well, to understand Pharaoh, the king of Mitzrayim as well as of Egypt that time, is to understand Mitzrayim. In very general terms, he was the bad guy. But, there have many types of bad guys throughout history, and we need to know precisely what kind he was, in order to know what we are trying to leave behind.

The following line from last week's parshah is a good start:

Pharaoh said, "Who is God, that I should obey him and let the Jewish people go? I do not know God, nor will I let the Jewish people go." (Shemos 5:2)

Now, from the above statement, one might assume that Pharaoh was unaware of God. However, as Rashi points out at the beginning of the parshah, that was not so, since Pharaoh specifically chose to

drown the Jewish children to avoid Divine punishment, knowing that God punishes measure-for-measure, and that He promised never to bring a Flood again after the one He used to destroy just about all of mankind. Had Pharaoh just been playing a game with Moshe Rabbeinu?

No. As the commentators point out, though Pharaoh was aware of God, he was only aware of a certain aspect of God, which we call Elokim. This is the level of Divine revelation that is responsible for the creation of the entire world, and the day-to-day running of it, but in such a way as to give rise to the notion of something called "nature," or consistent miracle, giving mankind the impression that there is a reliable order to everyday life.

In fact, so reliable that, in general, the weak fall prey to the strong, and the pure are victimized by the impure. Indeed, it is a world in which you can cheat and get away with it, at least for a while, and in some cases, a long while. People always have. People still do, causing many throughout history to ask the question: Why do bad things happen to good people, and good things to bad people?

The trick is, as Pharaoh learned from Noach's generation, is to get out of the game while you are still ahead. It is possible, Pharaoh assumed, to play poker with Elokim. After all, there probably had been plenty of people who had lived freely, dying happily before the Flood ever came. And, had the rest of the people of Noach's time simply heeded the warnings and done teshuvah before the Flood began, then they also would have had their cakes and eaten them too.

It's like living in the path of a glacier. There is no question that doing so can be dangerous, but naturally-speaking, it takes a certain amount of time for a glacier to descend down a mountain, something that can be calculated. As long as nature is allowed to run its course unabated, and the townspeople move in time, then danger can be avoided.

Likewise, Pharaoh gambled, since Elokim works, naturally-speaking, measure-for-measure, and naturally-speaking, water was no longer an option for punishing him, then, naturally-speaking, he had time before God could find another way, naturally-speaking, to take revenge against him for his evil and genocidal behavior.

Moshe Rabbeinu was sent to Pharaoh to inform him that, though he may have been right until now, history demanded that another, higher level aspect of God enter the picture at that time:

*Therefore, the wicked shall not be vindicated in judgment, nor the sinful in the assembly of the righteous. For, God attends the way of the righteous, while the way of the wicked will perish.
(Tehillim 1:5)*

It's not that God, appearing as Hovayah, was going to break His own rules for Creation. It was that God, as Hovayah, was about to take advantage of rules built into Creation, mentioned right there in the fine print, that allow Him to overturn the natural order of Creation to expedite important historical events, such as the exodus from Mitzrayim.

"Hmm, interesting," Pharaoh told Moshe Rabbeinu. "I can't recall seeing that happen anywhere before. It would certainly be a first for history," he mocked Moshe.

"Well, at least on this scale," Moshe Rabbeinu mocked him back, unfazed by his intransigence. "And, you will be the first leader to be toppled in such a way!"

"Hmm," Pharaoh thought more deeply, pulling at his long Egyptian beard, pretending to be weighing the odds. "It sounds menacing ." he said, faking concern, "but I am going to have to assume that you are bluffing."

By Your light may we see light. (Tehillim 36:10)

Therefore," Pharaoh continued, changing his tone and sounding menacing himself, impressing the Egyptian courtiers standing around him, "I think I will take my chances and not free your people. Indeed, I am going to increase their hardship, and let the people themselves blame their troubles on you and your God!"

Extend Your kindness to those who know You, and Your charity to the upright of heart. Let not the foot of the arrogant come to me, and let not the hand of the wicked move me. (Tehillim 36:11)

Like strong medicine that can only be taken in increments, the plagues were doses of Hovayah delivered in increasing amounts of revelation. Because, there is a downside to Divine revelation: decreased free-will. The point of free-will is to use it to do that which reveals the hand of God in life to mankind. The more God does it Himself, the less mankind has to do it on his own, and therefore, the less reward he will receive in the World-to- Come for doing so.

Therefore, for our sake, God remains hidden as long as possible, except to the person who has already found Him. And when history demands that He reveal Himself, He does so in increments, so that after each revelation, there is still some room left to make a free-will decision to say, "Hey, that's gotta be the hand of God making all that happen!"

THAT is what it REALLY means to leave Mitzrayim, which, as we see from the story of the Exodus, can happen while a person is still in Egypt, or America, or anywhere else in the world of that matter. Indeed, a person can even be living in Eretz Yisroel and be living in Mitzrayim at the same time, though he is not in Egypt at all! There are many Jews doing exactly that today here in the Holy Land, because they insist on living on the level of Elokim, if even that.

The word "Charedi," which means "one who fears," only has meaning if the one whom he fears is God, and nothing else. Therefore, to earn that title, one must fear only God, and know that, no matter what someone does to him, it is all min HaShamayim-from God. The human perpetrators are only shlichim-messengers of God-though, as always, they'll have to answer to God why they were so good at it.

In other words, being Charedi in the true sense of the term has less to do with the uniform that one wears than it does with one's attitude towards Divine Providence, though obviously, on some level, the two issues will overlap. How one dresses is also an expression of one's level of fear of God, or to be more accurate, of one's seeing of God. And, certainly if one does dress the part, he should live up to the implication, or risk being a Chillul Hashem—a profanation of the Name of God.

And, since the reality of Mitzrayim is not tied to geography, mitzvos designed to help us break away from it apply even beyond the borders of Egypt, long after Pharaoh and his people were wiped away. Mitzvos such as the Eglah Arufah (Devarim 21:1), the ceremony performed upon finding a dead body, but not the murderer, or Petter Chamor (Shemos 13:11), which requires the owner of a first born donkey to redeem it with a sheep which must be given to the kohen.

In each case, the neck of the animal is broken from the back, the arufah, which in Hebrew has the same letters as Pharaoh. For, the attitude, in each case, that leads to the necessity of breaking the back of the neck is a Mitzrayim-like attitude, one of selfishness, and a lack of clarity regarding Who it is that gives man what he needs to survive, and therefore, how to treat other people.

Do you want to leave Mitzrayim, wherever it is that you live? Do you want to complete your journey that began over three millennia ago, perhaps even ahead of the rest of the nation, which will only do so once Moshiach comes? After all, that is why it is called "Keitz HaYomim," that is, "the end of the days."

Which days?

The 190 years that we left Egypt early, before we were done, leaving us still in Mitzrayim until this day. That is why, says the Ben Ish Chai, that the gematria of keitz is 190, to indicate that only once Moshiach comes and reveals God to all of mankind, will the words of Zechariah be fulfilled:

On that day, God will be one and His Name will be one. (Zechariah 14:9)

But, in the meantime, individuals can leave early. They can personally leave Mitzrayim early if and when they stop saying "Who is Hashem?" when they stop betting on nature, trying to have their cake and eat it too, trusting that, if nature is allowed to run its course, they'll be enough time to do teshuvah, and leave exile while it is still safe.

Historically, the individuals who made the break and left Mitzrayim often left their host nation in exile on time as well. The nation, which like Pharaoh, gambled against time, historically, has always fared far less well. And, if you want more details, then you can buy my book, "No Such Victim: A Book About Divine Providence and How To Work With It," on line at www.thirtysix.org. At the very least, it will help you leave your very own Mitzrayim.

Text

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