

THE SELF ESTEEM FOR FREEDOM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God said to Moshe, "Go to Pharaoh. I have allowed him to be stubborn, as well as his servants, in order to perform My signs among them . . . (Shemos 10:1)

There are many things that go into making redemption a reality. However, one thing that is important for achieving freedom, both on a national and a personal level, is not something that people think about off the bat. Yet, without it, it is hard to maintain the freedom that was achieved, as the journey of the Jewish people makes clear.

In modern psychology, we call it self-esteem. A crucial part of gaining freedom, and certainly a major part of keeping it, is a sense of self-worth. In fact, it was so central to the geulah process that the first eight plagues were designed to increase the self-esteem of the Jewish people, in order to make sure that when the time was ready to leave, the Jewish people would be ready to go.

Moshe Rabbeinu made it known to the Jewish people how dear they were to God so that their hearts and souls would be directed to God always, and all they had to do was strengthen themselves in faith and trust in God, that He would forever do miracles for them. For, they knew that their entire redemption could have happened without such revealed miracles, as it says, "He could have unleashed His power and destroyed you and your people with pestilence . . ." (Shemos 9:15), which is not such a great miracle. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 6)

In other words, as much as we take the 10 Plagues for granted, as if leaving Egypt was impossible without them, or that escaping the pursuing Egyptians could only happen if the sea split, none of this is true. God could easily have destroyed Egypt with pestilence, and the Jewish people could have walked out of Egypt on their own. It wouldn't have resulted in the holiday of Pesach, but at least the Jewish people would have been freed. And, should you say, "What about the fact that the plague would have killed Egyptians and not Jews, making it an obvious Heavenly intervention?" the answer, it would have killed Jews too. In fact, it could have killed the 12,000,000 Jews that actually died in the Plague of Darkness instead, which would have really trivialized the miracles of redemption.

Or, just as God tampered with Pharaoh's free-will to make him reject Moshe's demand of freedom, He could have tampered with it to make him accept it instead. After all, as the Vilna Gaon points out, God caused Achashveros to kill Vashti totally against his will, to make room for Esther. Pharaoh could have even sent us off with a farewell party, if God had so wanted it.

So, then, why all the miracles? As mentioned in last week's Perceptions, to make it clear to the Jewish people just how much God loved them, so that they would not only believe in Him, but in themselves as well. For, as it turns out, the entire failure of the exodus from Egypt was the result of a lack of self-esteem:

Moshe Rabbeinu knew that [keeping the miraculous light] at that time was dependent upon their strengthening themselves in trust in God, and for this the verse faults them: "Because you did not believe in God and did not trust in His salvation" (Tehillim 78:22), and it adds: "Nevertheless, they sinned further and had no faith in His wonders" (Tehillim 78:32). However, this was not due to an evil heart, God forbid, but because they did not find themselves worthy of this. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 5)

In other words, how could the generation of Jews that left Egypt with Moshe Rabbeinu doubt the miraculous ability of God after seeing all the miracles they had in Egypt and since leaving? They couldn't. So what did they doubt? They doubted that they were worthy of more miracles, even though they had been unworthy of all of the previous ones as well. However, they doubted that, based upon their lower level of spirituality, God would keep doing miracles for them.

Therefore, when they came to the desert and found themselves constantly tempted by the Sitra Achra and his trickery, they did not encourage themselves to trust in God so that He could deal with them beyond measure and with constant miracles; they felt unworthy of this. Therefore, instead, they constantly complained, "Why did you bring us up from Egypt?" since they saw that they could not maintain the proper faith in God because of the yetzer hara that kept overcoming them and renewing itself each day. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 5)

They had been a generation that had been born into slavery, which means they had a slave mentality. The freedom that we take for granted had previously been unknown to them, and it is easier to take a man out of slavery than it is to take the slavery out of a man. Even a year of incredible miracles on their behalf, including being allowed to see the enemy disposed of at the will of God, didn't change that.

It was the next generation of Jews who entered the Land 40 years later. They had been a generation born into freedom, though they had been one that had been impacted by a generation born into slavery. Nevertheless, being born or growing up after the slavery was over gave the children of those who left Egypt a fighting chance at believing in themselves, and therefore, a chance at believing in the miracles of God to save them.

If we check ourselves out, we can see that the situation is not much different today, even though we have been born into freedom. One of the reasons that we don't believe that Moshiach could come in

our generation is because we cannot see how history today could evolve into such a period of time short of some amazing miracles.

And, even though the Talmud says that such great miracles will in fact occur at the end of this exile, we can't imagine them happening for us. Why should they? Compared to previous generations, who are we? What have we accomplished? Look at the problems we have? Why should God even want to redeem us in the first place?

They are all good questions, and they deserve a good answer: because God loves His people. "But He also allowed the Jewish people to suffer in Egypt," a person might argue, "and He allowed a Holocaust to occur!"

Another good question deserving of another good answer: because God loves His people.

"You call that love!" a person may further argue. And the answer against is in the affirmative: yes, as mentioned last week. However, even if we still find it hard to believe in ourselves or our relationship with God, we still have to believe and trust that the redemption can come in our time, as it says:

In the future, at the arrival of Moshiach, which will be in its time even if the entire generation is guilty, the light will be flowing continuously. However, this will only be after the four exiles and the refinement of Torah by which we live, after which time will come the great and awesome day spoken about: "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 God presenters of offerings in righteousness" (Malachi 3:2-3). All the events that will occur as a result of the refinement of the Torah amongst the Jewish people from the time that it was given until then will act as the necessary inducement from below. (Drushei Olam HaTohu, Chelek 2, Drush 5, Anaf 4, Siman 6)

In other words, back at the beginning of Jewish history, before the Torah was given and the Jewish people endured the four exiles that followed, it took a lot more from the Jewish people to maintain the high level of Divine light that came down and caused the 10 Plagues and the splitting of the sea, etc. Without the proper merit, at that time, the light was subject to be withdrawn and the completion of redemption could be delayed.

No so, however, at the end of history, in our time. In short, our dues have been paid, and if we don't bring Moshiach on our own it will happen nevertheless, albeit after a War of Gog and Magog, perhaps. Either way, the Final Redemption will come, worthy or unworthy. In our time, it is more like, "Ready or not, here it comes," except that it still pays to be ready. Given the size of the miracles that will occur, God willing, you won't want to be caught by surprise.

Text

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