

LEAVING MITZRAYIM: IT IS ALL FOR OUR GOOD

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

God led the people in a circuitous route, by the way of the wilderness by the Red Sea. The Children of Israel went up armed out of the land of Egypt. (Shemos 13:18)

They seem to be two different explanations. The Hebrew word is chamushim, which Rashi says means armed. In other words, Rashi explains, when the Jewish people escaped Mitzrayim they left armed for battle, because leaving Egypt was only the first act; perhaps, they reasoned, they would have to encounter other dangerous armies along their way to the Promised Land.

The other explanation Rashi provides is a play on the word chamushin, understanding it as being derived from the word chamishah, which means five, indicating that only one-fifth of the Jewish population at that time actually left Egypt. The remaining four-fifths, as the Midrash explains, died in the ninth plague, the Plague of Darkness.

Seemingly, one explanation has nothing to do with the other. Furthermore, both do not seem necessary, only one. Why did Rashi see fit to provide both explanations?

The clue is in the first verse of the parshah which says:

And it came to pass when Pharaoh sent the people out that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although it was near. God said, "In case the people have regrets when they see war and will return to Egypt." (Shemos 13:7)

Really? They would? After witnessing the utter destruction of Egypt through 10 awesome plagues? After waking up to the depletion of the Jewish people by four-fifths in the Plague of Darkness?

Apparently yes. They were the surviving one-fifth, but not by much. The four-fifths who died chose to remain in Egypt and did, but not the way they planned. The one-fifth who survived were not necessarily excited about leaving Egypt for the uncertainty of the desert, but at least they didn't want to stay behind either.

However, as we will see later from the episode of the spies, it didn't take much to change their minds and turn the one-fifth into the four-fifths, not in number but in attitude. They didn't just reject Eretz Yisroel, they were prepared to run back to Egypt as well.

Their lack of trust in God from the outset was evident by the fact that they armed themselves on their way out of Egypt. In spite of the fact that God had conquered Egypt without requiring a single Jew to lift a single weapon to help, they still felt the need to arm themselves on their momentous

departure from Egyptian. Therefore, God said:

"In case the people have regrets when they see war and will return to Egypt." (Shemos 13:7)

This is the thread that joins together both explanations of Rashi. It was their need for chamushin that indicated the fact that they were also chamishah, meaning the remaining one-fifth who were just a little better than the four-fifths that died. Taking this into account, God took them on a circuitous route to freedom to give them time to work on their faith and trust and perhaps, just maybe, become a lot better than the four-fifths they left behind.

This may also be one of the reasons why God had them backtrack and return to the Red Sea. It wasn't just about escaping the Egyptians. They had already done that, and if God had wanted, He could have subdued the pursuing Egyptian army with another miracle miles before they even reached the Jewish people.

Rather, God wanted the Jewish people to experience being trapped by an enemy nation with nowhere to go and no way to be victorious, and then be victorious for them. He wanted the Jewish people to learn a fundamental lesson of bitachon and emunah—trust and faith in God: Just because we can't see how to solve our problems doesn't mean that God doesn't either. Just because we cannot imagine a solution to our difficulties doesn't mean that God can't also. Our limitations are not His.

There is no question that the splitting of the sea accomplished that, albeit temporarily. The special song they sang by the sea after the great miracle revealed the transformation they underwent, and how they rose above the mundane reality to which they had become accustomed after so many years of slavery in Egypt.

The second part of this lesson was the mann. Raining down Divine sustenance was designed to show the Jewish people what it meant to live supernaturally, with the hope that they would maintain the level they reached by the sea from that point onward. Perhaps they might have, had it not been for the Erev Rav and people like Dasan and Aviram, who left Egypt with the struggling one-fifth.

Had they maintained such a level they would never have asked:

"Is God among us or not?" (Shemos 17:7)

Where else could He have been after all the miracles He had thus far performed, and continued to perform for them? They had already been a month in the desert and were surviving just fine. They had not had to fight anyone so far, and there was nothing to indicate that they would have to in the near future, until that is, they asked the question:

Amalek came and attacked Israel in Refidim . . . (Shemos 17:8). The Torah places this section immediately after this verse (when they said, "Is God among us or not?") to imply, "I am always among you and ready at hand for everything you need, and yet you say, 'Is God among us or not?' By your lives,

that dog shall come and bite you, and you will cry for Me and then you will know where I am!" It is like a man who carried his son on his shoulders and went on a journey. The son saw an article and said, "Father, pick up that thing and give it to me." He gave it to him, and so a second time and also a third time. Yet, when they met a certain man along the journey, the son asked him, "Have you seen my father anywhere?" Therefore, the father said to him, "You do not know where I am?" at which point he put him down and a dog came and bit him. (Rashi)

In this simple analogy is a deep idea about why people have difficulty making the leap and having faith in God. So many people pin the blame on God and complain that He does not do enough to warrant our faith in Him. There are so many miracles they had hoped for, especially during times of great need, and God, according to these people, just didn't come through.

But the truth is, if God is guilty of anything at all, so-to-speak, it is that He is so secretive about the miracles He does do for us, which are more than we can ever count or know. From conception onward our lives are one miracle after another, and the only reason why we lose perspective of this is because they happen so consistently. Like the boy in the analogy, we forget upon whose shoulders we live.

Sure, we don't always get what we want, or when or how we wanted it. But then again, neither do our children get everything they want from us, and yet we expect them to trust us implicitly. We expect them to show us gratitude for what we do for them, and understanding for what we don't. And when they take our love for granted we often feel scorned and upset, and sometimes even a need to teach them a lesson or two about the thing.

For we know, as adults, that the greatest kindness we can do for our children is to make them into independent and responsible individuals. We know that we have the short-term power to make them happy by granting many of their daily wishes on demand, but that in doing so, we deny them the long-term advantage of being able to make themselves truly happy later in life.

In our heart of hearts, do we really think that it is any different between our Father in Heaven and us His children? Just as any good parent has to bite the bullet when doing what is best for his or her children at the cost of the child's immediate happiness, God does it as well for us when He feels that the miracle we want will do more harm than good in the long run.

The secret to earning the trust of anyone is not by giving them everything they want, or in giving it to them in a way that they can recognize and thank us. It is in convincing the subject of our love that whatever we do for him or her, it is for their own good. It is that knowledge that allows us to deal with the tough love of which we may be the recipient from time-to-time without feeling a sense of betrayal.

If you're going to leave Mitzrayim, which ultimately is not only a geographic location, but also a symbol of spiritual slavery in every generation, you want to arm yourself with the knowledge that God is our Father, and we are His children, and that everything He does for us, without fail, is for our

good, not His. From that perspective it is impossible not to have faith in Him.

Text

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