

LEAVING MITZRAYIM

by Rabbi Pinchas Winston

We are, once again, at Parashas Bo and the redemption from Egypt. Personally, every time I get to this point in the story, I feel excitement. I just find that the redemption from Egypt never gets old.

And it shouldn't, because it never does get old, not on a personal level or on a national level. Redemption from Egypt has been taking place since then, and will continue to do so until Yemos HaMoshiach.

On a national level, "Mitzrayim" is more a concept than a place. Kabbalah explains that the word is comprised of two smaller words, "meitzer," which means "boundary," and "yum," which means "sea." "Yum" has a gematria of 50, an allusion to the "Fifty Gates of Understanding," the basis of Torah and true wisdom.

Mitzrayim, therefore, is any society that constricts the light of God. In Ya'akov's time through Moshe's time, it was Egypt. Since then, it has been any people who has adopted a similar approach to life. A society, even if Jewish, that lives contrary to Torah values is a "Mitzrayim" in its time.

On a personal level, leaving Mitzrayim means managing one's own personal klipah, or yetzer hara. On a national level, Pharaoh WAS the yetzer hara. In the individual, the yetzer hara is the person's Pharaoh.

It says in Sha'ar HaGilgulim that when Adam HaRishon sinned, all souls that were a part of his soul fell off into the Klipos, the realm of spiritual impurity. Even though a soul leaves the Klipos when migrating to a body, one specific klipah remains with it all of his lives. This klipah is like spiritual clothing for his soul, and it is the source of a person's spiritual weakness, creating challenges and tests throughout life.

If a person overcomes his yetzer hara at a time of test, then he has temporarily left his personal Mitzrayim for the moment. If he overcomes a particular yetzer hara for the rest of his life, then he has left "Mitzrayim" for good, with respect to that particular evil inclination. If a person remains "enslaved" to his yetzer hara, then he remains in his own personal version of Mitzrayim.

How does one go about freeing himself from Mitzrayim? That's where these parshios come in, especially this week's. There are two ways in which this week's parsha can be learned. As a history lesson about events long over, or as a manual to personal freedom. The first approach prolongs exile, the second liberates.

The first lesson is, to not be afraid of the yetzer hara. God didn't just send Moshe and Aharon to Pharaoh, He told them to "come" to him. The difference? When someone goes TO something, it is as a stranger from the outside. When a person COMES somewhere, it implies a sense of familiarity, of comfort. God was telling Moshe and Aharon: "You are the 'ba'alei battim' now. Pharaoh has become YOUR servant."

That's how we should feel about our yetzer hara. The yetzer hara uses fear tactics to get us to do things we'd rather not do, and to not do things we ought to do. "If you don't have that fattening desert, you will truly miss out on an important part of life," the master of temptation tells us. "Eat it now before it is too late."

As my Rosh HaYeshivah used to say, "Do what you WANT to do, not what you FEEL like doing." We WANT to do the right thing, he told us. We just don't always FEEL like doing it. Knowing this alone is a great weapon in fighting for spiritual survival.

Next came the Korban Pesach. It is amazing how many people say they want to change for the better, but upon arriving at the threshold of transformation, back down and capitulate to their old and erring ways. A form of psychological addiction, they have a tough time making the break from past bad habits.

This is why the Jewish people brought a Korban Pesach. It could have been any kind of kosher animal, but God made it the one that the Egyptians worshipped. Redemption was only possible if the person was willing to make a complete break with the past, in this case, their Egyptian past.

One might have thought that such a break would have already occurred as a result of the slavery. It wasn't as if the Jewish people had assimilated into Egyptian culture as Jews have today into Western society. They weren't in positions of government, running major business and earning big bucks, and enjoying the perks that come with success in a gentile world. They were rejected by the Egyptians, so how could they have remained attached to their way of life?

Au contraire. We tend to want the most the things we can't have. People pine for acceptance in the places they are the most rejected. In fact, four-fifths of the Jewish people died in the Plague of Darkness because they could finally enjoy the Egypt they helped to build. Given the choice of a Jewish lifestyle in a Jewish land or an Egyptian one in an Egyptian land, four-fifths—FOUR-FIFTHS!!—of the Jewish people chose the latter. They were deemed beyond spiritual recognition, beyond redemption.

It has always amazed me how different groups of Jews over the centuries have picked up customs from their host cultures which were not friendly to their Jewish populations. Poland, for example, was heavily anti-Semitic. Yet, many Jewish groups absorbed some of their clothing traditions. In other places, eating habits were adopted.

It can be for a number of reasons. If hostages can, over time, come to sympathize with their captors,

or worse, then certainly slaves can come to identify with their masters. Freedom, for many, has meant finally being able to do that which they could only watch their enslavers do.

Some of the adopted habits can be useful. Some are not useful, but they are not harmful either. In many cases, the assimilated ways can actually hinder spiritual growth, water down a Torah lifestyle or even warp it. There's a lot of that in the Jewish people, as there has been in many generations in the past.

This is especially so for those who have grown up as a full-fledged member of secular society, only to leave it later to live a Torah life. Some weren't overly attached to the secular world while a part of it, and have little difficulty leaving it behind. Others enjoyed themselves while secular, and find it more difficult to move on when their past crosses paths with their present. The result can be a compromise that stunts their transition from the way of man to the way of God.

The Korban Pesach was a sacrifice. God is saying that He knows that leaving one's past in the past is also a sacrifice. It is one however that has to be made with a complete heart, if a person is going to cross the threshold into a holy and far more spiritually productive lifestyle. The alternative might look like fun for now, but it will prove itself at some time in the future to be darkness. It is a darkness that is the very opposite of personal and national redemption.