

# BORN TO BE FREE!

*by Rabbi Aron Tendler*

The 210 years that the Jews were in Egypt provided the time and the circumstances for the sons of Yakov to grow from a family of 70 into a nation of 3 million. Additionally, the sequence of slavery, affliction, and redemption molded the basic character of the nation and prepared them to receive the Torah.

If the children of Yakov had remained in the land of Canaan, or had they remained among the elite of Egypt as Yoseph had intended, the family would have quickly assimilated into the surrounding society and their Jewish identity would have been lost. Instead, the family of Yakov was isolated and then persecuted so that the demarcation between Jew and Egyptian would be clearly established and maintained, especially by the Egyptian. Not only was the Jew forced to live apart from the standard Egyptian citizen, but because the Jews were second class the dominant society discouraged any kind of acceptance or assimilation of the Jew into Egyptian society.

At the incident of the Burning Bush, G-d told Moshe that the final proof that it was G-d Who had sent Moshe to redeem the Jews from slavery would be, "All of you will then become G-d's servants on this mountain." (3:120). The giving of the Torah would be the ultimate proof.

Why was Mattan Torah - Revelation a greater proof of G-d's existence than the Ten Plagues or the splitting of the Yam Suff - Red Sea? It seems that the miracles preceding Revelation were far more spectacular and impacting than Revelation itself. It was after the splitting of the sea that the verse says, "And they believed in G-d and in His servant Moshe." (14:31). It was following the plague of Darkness that the verse states, "Moshe was also very respected in Egypt, both by Pharaoh's officials and by the people." (11:3). Why then is the giving of the Torah considered the ultimate proof of G-d's control over the Exodus, more so than all the preceding events?

There is nothing more difficult than changing human nature. Who and what we are is a complex equation of nature and nurture. Nature involves both genetics as well as our G-d given talents, character strengths, and spiritual challenges. Nurture involves all aspects of our upbringing and involvement with family and society. Due to these complexities, it takes courage, strength, determination and time for a single person to change themselves. To change an entire nation or society should certainly require even far more courage, strength, determination and time.

The Bnai Yisroel were in Egypt for 210 years. According to Chazal - the Rabbis, the slavery began in earnest with the death of Levi in 2332, and the extreme persecution and affliction began with the

birth of Miriam in 2362. That means that the actual period of overt slavery lasted 116 years of which 85 years involved severe persecution. Besides the 116 year of overt slavery, the Bnai Yisroel were apart from Eretz Yisroel for 210 years. Therefore, most Jews knew only Goshen as their home. Eretz Yisroel was the stuff of legends and family lore. (To gain a contemporary perspective on the affect that 116 years of slavery can have on a population, keep in mind that the USSR was under communist influence for only 70 years).

At the time of Revelation the Jews had to be of a certain frame of mind and attitude. They had to be a freethinking society able to willfully and willingly accept the Torah. They also had to have attained the level of national unity described by Chazal as, "one man with one heart."

On the one hand the Jews had to have evolved out of their "nurtured" slave mentality to become truly free. On the other hand they had to be confident enough in their own newly gained freedom to understand that everyone was equally important and interdependent upon each other. In order for them to serve G-d as humanities teacher they would have to be unified and single minded in their collective resolve to serve humanity.

A freed slave is not automatically a free man. He may be freed of his obligation to work for a specific person or family, but his thinking and self- image will still be that of a slave. The best example is the history of the Black community following their emancipation from slavery. It has taken almost 150 years for both the Black community and the general American society to accept each other as equals. To become the "Kingdom of Priests and a Holy Nation" that G-d expected, demanded selflessness, generosity, and a sense of responsibility for others that is not part of the slave mentality.

The slave is overwhelmed by the notion of freedom to the extent that he doesn't know what to do with his freedom. As history has recorded, most of the freed slaves in America stayed on the plantations that were familiar to them, rather than venture out into a world they didn't understand.

Imagine telling a newly freed slave that in addition to his being freed from bondage, he must choose to become responsible for the well being of his former masters! In essence, those were G-d's exact expectations for the Bnai Yisroel. In addition to their gaining freedom from the Egyptians, they were to accept the Torah that would catapult them into the position of teaching the rest of the world, including their former masters, about G-d. In deed and word, the Jew would have to embrace the non-Jewish world and become their "Kingdom of Priests!" It was unrealistic enough to think that the Jews would overcome their slave mentality in time to willfully accept the Torah. It was doubly unrealistic to think that the Jews would take their new- found freedom and give it up by becoming responsible for the rest of humanity! Yet, this was the expectation for the Jews at the time of the Exodus and the transformation from slave to free man to kingdom of priests had to happen in a little more than a year!

Moshe's mission as the Redeemer began approximately one year before the actual exodus. The

giving of the Torah took place seven weeks after the Jews left Egypt. That means that Moshe has a little more than one year to alter the attitudes and thinking of the Jews, from slavery to freedom. How was this seemingly impossible evolution going to take place?

In this week's Parsha there are two instructions that were essential for transforming the Jew. Following the plague of Darkness, G-d instructed Moshe to ask the Jews to do Him a favor. "Let each one request from his friend gold and silver articles" (11:2). My father Shlita explained that this was fundamental to the transformation of their slave mentality. Can you imagine the newly freed Black man approaching his former master and requesting to borrow his fine china and silver, in order to properly celebrate their freedom? A freed slave still thinks and feels like a slave. The freed slave does not feel equal to his former master, regardless of the rhetoric of revolution and social change. By asking the Jews to act like equals to their former masters and request from them gold and silver vessels, G-d advanced their evolution out of the slave mentality.

The second instruction involved the Korban Pesach - the Pascal Lamb. First of all, the mere notion of taking the Egyptian god and tying him up to their bed-post and then slaughtering and eating it advanced their feelings of freedom. Secondly, the Korban Pesach had to be eaten entirely, and in order to do this, individuals and families would join together according to the number of people necessary to consume the entire Korban. (12:2-3).

The lesson of the Korban Pesach was that their newly found freedom involved first of all, the doing of Mitzvos. Secondly, to serve Hashem properly requires two essential components: family, and community. ; The Jew can not live alone. In order to do the work of a Jew, we must work together as "a single man with a single heart."

---

Copyright © 1997 by Rabbi Aron Tendler and Project Genesis, Inc.

---

The author is Rabbi of Shaarey Zedek Congregation, Valley Village, CA.

---