

SOLE SURVIVOR

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Following the Parting of the Red Sea, Moshe and Miriam led the Jewish people in a song of exaltation and thanksgiving. The Shira - Song described the miracle and the profoundly awesome effect it had upon the Jews and the entire world. In a single moment G-d shifted the balance of world power. Egypt, the most advanced civilization of the time, had been brought to its knees in one blast of G-d's intent.

The evidence was beyond repudiation. The 600 elite captains of Egypt could be seen strewn on the shores of the sea. Additionally, Rashi references the Mechilta (14:25) that says, "Just as the Egyptians were smitten at the sea so too were the Egyptians in Egypt subject to further destruction." The Jews had not lifted a finger in their own defense. Instead, as Moshe had said, "G-d will do battle. You shall remain silent."

Imagine the reaction of the surviving Egyptians. For an entire year they had endured the plagues. The rationalization that had allowed them to participate in the 116 years of forced Jewish enslavement and persecution crumbled beneath the crushing evidence of G-d's power. They considered Moshe a great man; yet, when Pharaoh "came to his senses," they supported his irrational pursuit of the Jews into the desert. Somehow, Pharaoh managed to ensnare his people in his suicidal charge against a power they all recognized as beyond comprehension and negotiation.

Why did the Egyptians follow Pharaoh in pursuit of the escaping Jews, and why were the Egyptians back home punished for Pharaoh's last-ditch folly? Furthermore, the Medresh says that Pharaoh himself did not die at the Yam Suf. Instead, he was saved from death so that he could wander the earth proclaiming G-d's sovereignty and judiciousness. Why was Pharaoh saved and his nation punished?

It had been a year of increasingly difficult and punishing displays of divine power culminating in the death of the first-born. Egypt was a nation broken and in mourning. They were a nation reeling from pain, guilt, and regret. Yet, at the rallying cry of Pharaoh the nation mobilized in a moment's notice to rush into the face of destruction.

Imagine the utter defeat, the spiritual wasteland that Egypt must have been after the Parting of the Sea. Not only had they suffered a crushing military defeat; they also had to endure the defeat of their culture and belief system. Their kings were not gods and their gods were not kings! Whatever

superiority they had nurtured over centuries of world dominion had been humbled by a nation of slaves. What darkness of spirit and depression must have possessed the surviving Egyptians in the aftermath of Kriyas Yam Suf!

210 years after Yakov and his family of 70 entered Egypt the singing of the Shira ended the era of slavery. Having first come as wards and guests of Pharaoh, the Egyptians attempted to destroy them. However, after Kriyas Yam Suf it was the children of Yakov, some 3 million strong, who witnessed Pharaoh's utter defeat.

The story was really about a nation's choices. Should the Jews remain honored guests of the state or should they attempt their destruction? Should they follow Pharaoh's lead and allow for national genocide, or should they remember their debt of gratitude to Yoseph who saved them and their ancestors?

With each plague the choice became more focused. Should they continue to support Pharaoh's agenda and suffer more pain, or should they rise in rebellion and force Pharaoh to let the Jews go?

The Torah recorded Egypt's dilemma. After the third plague of lice the Egyptian advisors informed Pharaoh that he was dealing with a power beyond their ability or comprehension. (8:15)

At the plague of Barad - hail the Torah recorded how there were Egyptians that "feared G-d, and sheltered their cattle" from the inevitable plague. (9:20)

Following the Barad, Pharaoh summoned Moshe and proclaimed G-d as righteous and he and his nation as sinners. (9:27) Prior to the plague of locust the advisors begged Pharaoh to let the Jews go. (10:7) After the plague Pharaoh again admitted to his sinfulness and begged for a reprieve from the plague. (10:17)

It appears that although Pharaoh was determined not to give in to G-d's demands, his servants, and by extension the general Egyptian population, would have done so after the third plague. We know that the first five plagues were within Pharaoh's ability to acquiesce and give in. However, starting with the plague of boils G-d removed Pharaoh's option of free will. From then on he became a pawn of G-d's will.

The Egyptian population, on the other hand, retained their free will throughout. At any point, they could have risen in rebellion against Pharaoh and fought for Jewish freedom. One of the explanations for "Shabbos Hagadol" - The Great Shabbos - the Shabbos before Pesach - is recorded in the Medresh that details the rebellion between the first born of Egypt and Pharaoh's forces. After Moshe's warning, the first-born believed that their death was imminent while Pharaoh refused to give in. So the first-born went to battle against Pharaoh and many Egyptians died in the short-lived rebellion. Yet, in general, the Egyptian population did not rebel.

Having been informed that the Jews appeared lost and wandering Pharaoh did exactly what G-d said he would be forced to do. (14:4) "And I will strengthen Pharaoh and he will pursue them... then

Egypt will know that I am G-d!" Pharaoh rallied his nation and they gave chase.

What an amazing turn of events! This final episode of the story followed a year of punishment, personal conflict, and the death of the first-born. The Jews had finally gained their freedom and had left Egypt. We might have thought that Pharaoh's defeat would have encouraged the Egyptian to finally stand against Pharaoh's irrational agenda of genocide. Finally their personal conflict was over. The Jews were gone and they could begin rebuilding their country. Yet, it states, "and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants became transformed!" (14:8) What happened?

Rashi referenced the Mechilta that states, "The Egyptians changed from what they were... instead they decided to chase after the Jews because of their money." Rashi informs us that the Egyptian population had not lost their free will. They were not like their king who had become G-d's pawn. They were independent of Pharaoh and willfully decided to follow his suicidal charge because they wanted their money back.

430 years earlier, at the Bris Bain Habisarim - the Covenant Between the Halves, G-d promised Avraham that his children would leave the land of their enslavement and affliction with great wealth. At the Burning Bush G-d reiterated His promise that the Jews would "empty Egypt of her wealth." From the very start The Egyptians were going to be put to the final test. Would they rise above their king's moral depravity and when given the chance champion Jewish rights and freedom? Or, would they show their true colors and when push came to shove ignore the evidence of their yearlong experience and follow their crazed king into further disaster and destruction?

If ever we needed proof that the Egyptian population was fully behind Pharaoh's genocidal intentions this week's Parsha provides the proof. They were not as bad as Pharaoh was, they were worse! This was not a nation held hostage to their king's grandiose illusions. This was a nation that willfully decided to join their king and follow his lead. Only when it became too painful and inconvenient did the people challenge Pharaoh. However, once they realized that their precious wealth had been taken, all other moral and personal considerations were abandoned.

In fact, throughout the story of the 10 Makos - plagues, the Egyptians themselves never expressed any regret. Pharaoh is the only one who admitted guilt and wrongdoing. Sure the Egyptian population recognized G-d's power, and they respected Moshe's position; however, they were conveniently able to blame Pharaoh for the unfortunate problem the Jews were suffering. "What can we do? We are not in charge! It is Pharaoh who is to be blamed. We are only servants (soldiers) listening to (orders) our master."

In the end, the Egyptian's were punished, both at the Yam Suf and in Mitzrayim. G-d correctly judged the entire nation for their willful complicity in the 116 years of forced slavery and affliction. However, Pharaoh was different. Sure, he had shown his true colors during the first five plagues; however, he had also expressed moments of regret and recognition of G-d's judicious righteousness. Therefore, in the end, following the spectacular destruction of his nation, Pharaoh remained as the sole

survivor. (The movie got it right.)

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