

THE GREATER MIRACLE

by Rabbi Aron Tendler

Yakov was 130 when he arrived in Egypt. Yoseph was 39 (17 + 22). Yocheved had just been born. Levi was approximately 44, maybe 45. The Medresh tells us that the active enslavement of the Jews began after Yoseph and his brothers had died. Levi was the last of the brothers to die. He died at the age of 137.

The enslavement was divided into two stages. The first stage was lowering the status of the Jews from protected wards of the state to the status of slaves of the state. The second stage of Jewish enslavement was to lower their status to second-class slaves, lower than the rest of Egyptian society.

The first stage of the enslavement process was not threatening to the Jews. In fact, for many it was a welcomed relief. Ever since the first two years of hunger when Yoseph had reorganized the Egyptian social structure, the entire population of Egypt had become Pharaoh's slaves. Therefore, the Jews becoming slaves was toward greater assimilation and acceptance into Egyptian society.

As history has proven, time and time again, the Jewish tendency is toward assimilation. We want to belong. We want to become citizens. The slave status in Egypt was no different than being a citizen. As guests in Goshen the Jews were welcomed wards of Pharaoh, dependant upon him for their sustenance and well-being. However, they were not citizens. They did not fully belong. Therefore, when Pharaoh rallied the masses to support his building projects for the greater glory of Egypt the Jews flocked to his call in hope of gaining greater acceptance and citizenship. This was what Pharaoh meant when he said, (1:10) "Come and let us be smart about this. Let us use what we know about the Jews against them and to our benefit."

The first stage of slavery began as soon as the Jews arrived in Egypt. So long as Yakov and his sons were alive the rate of assimilation into Egyptian society was slower. That lasted for 93 years. However, once Levi passed away the assimilative nature of the Jews was given free reign and the Jews began to spread out within the general Egyptian population. (Note: The only Tribe that avoided slavery was Levi)

On Pasuk, (1:7) "And the land was filled with them (the Jews)," the Yalkut stated: "If the Egyptians went to the theater, it was full of Jews; if they went to the circus, again, the place was full of Jews."

Following the death of Levi, the enslavement of the Jews began in earnest. For the next 31 years the

Jews were forced into a labor force that was exclusively Jewish. The general population remained slaves to Pharaoh, but the Jewish status was lowered to below the general population. This was the stage mentioned in last week's Parsha, (1:6) "And a new king arose who did not know Yoseph."

Focusing on the root of the name Miriam - Mar - bitter, the Medresh tells us that Miriam was named Miriam because the more intense persecution and enslavement began at her birth. We know that Miriam was six years older than Moshe and Moshe was 80 years old at the time of the Exodus. Therefore, the final stage of slavery lasted 85 years. (During the final year in Egypt, the year of the 10 plagues, active slavery ended.)

The process of the enslavement and persecution of the Jews took 210 years. The first 93 years until the death of Levi; the 31 years from the death of Levi to the birth of Miriam; and the final 86 years until the Exodus.

In last week's Parsha Moshe confronted Pharaoh and demanded that he release the Jews. Pharaoh refused and punished Moshe and Aharon by making it worse for the Jewish slaves. In this week's Parsha Moshe was instructed to facilitate the first seven of the ten plagues. In the first five Makos, Pharaoh was given the chance to willfully listen to G-d and release the Jews from slavery. Starting with the sixth plague, Hashem removed Pharaoh's freewill. As stated in the Pasuk (9:12), "And G-d hardened Pharaoh's heart." With the plague of boils Pharaoh became G-d's tool for proclaiming to the Jews and the entire world, "There is none like Me on all the earth! (9:14)"

From the very start of Moshe's mission at the Burning Bush G-d told Moshe that His purpose in freeing the Jews by doing miracles and wonders was to proclaim His greatness. (3:20) "Then I will stretch out My hand and strike down Mitzrayim with all the miracles that I will perform in its midst." (6:1) "Now you will see what I will do to Pharaoh; for by a strong hand will he let them go!" Therefore, G-d's reasons for "flexing His muscles and showing off" was not only to free the Jews from slavery. Had he wanted the Jews free He only had to keep one plague going long enough to break Pharaoh's resistance. Had Mitzrayim been left drinking blood for more than a week, Pharaoh would have capitulated or his nation would have rebelled. (Think French Revolution) However, to make an ever-lasting impression on the Jews and the world G-d wanted a series of miracles and spectacles.

Considering that Pharaoh had his free will for the first five plagues, what would have happened if Pharaoh had listened to G-d's wishes? What would have happened if Pharaoh had released the Jews after the first plague? More so, what would have happened if Pharaoh had listened right at the start and there would have never been the need for any of the plagues? It is true that the Jews would have been freed, but what about the big PR splash? What would have been with, "There is none like Me on all the earth! (9:14)"

Furthermore, had Pharaoh given in right away there would have never been the need for the Parting of the Yam Suf. The Jews would have never witnessed the Egyptians being punished for the 116 years of enslavement and persecution. Divine justice would have never been revealed, and the likes

of Yisro might never have been influenced to join our people. After enduring the merciless oppression of the Egyptians for so many years, how would the Jews have felt if Pharaoh and Mitzrayim had gotten off without any punishment?

Divine justice has nothing to do with revenge. Justice's intent is to create an environment conducive to having a relationship with G-d. Revenge, on the other hand, is a purposeless and destructive feeling we are forbidden to entertain.

Evil must be deterred and punishment is one method for doing so. Yet, punishment and reward must also encourage us to develop a closer relationship with G-d. Often times, justice demands that we change our behavior and thinking which in turn awakens in us a greater sense of goodness and truth. The process of change demands brutal self-honesty and sacrifice. This can be painful; however, the end result is well worth the effort if it results in a greater understanding and commitment to doing G-d's wishes. In the end there is hopefully a greater adherence to the word of G-d that both proves and proclaims G-d's greatness and benevolence.

Imagine what the affect would have been if Pharaoh had immediately capitulated and released the Jews from slavery. It would have been the story of Yonah, Nineveh, and the King. Upon hearing the decree, "In 40 days G-d will destroy Nineveh," the King stepped down from his throne, rent his royal garments, put on sack cloth and ashes and proclaimed G-d's absolute majesty. (Keep in mind the Medresh says that the King of Nineveh was Pharaoh.) There was no need for spectacles, miracles or wonders. In fact, the greatest expression of G-d's majesty and dominion was the acquiescence of the king and his acceptance of Yonah's prophecy.

Pharaoh was king of the world. Egypt was the mightiest nation of the time, and Pharaoh the mightiest ruler of the time. Imagine the utter amazement of the Egyptians, and by extension the rest of the world, if Pharaoh would have proclaimed during the first five plagues, "Now I have sinned; G-d is the righteous one, and I and my people, we are the guilty ones." (9:27) After 209 years of processed slavery, 85 years of intense persecution, and countless crimes against humanity, Pharaoh suddenly found religion? If the purpose of all the miracles was to proclaim G-d's majesty and greatness, that would have been the greatest miracle of all! (See Darash Moshe 6:2)

More so, had Pharaoh willfully agreed to free the Jews, the era of Mashiach would have begun. Pharaoh, at the head of the mightiest army on earth, would have escorted the Jews along the edge of the Mediterranean, through the lands of the Philistines, directly into Israel. The trip would have taken less than a week and the Egyptians would have then subdued the inhabitants of Canaan chasing them out of the land. The Jews would have occupied the land without lifting a sword! That would have been a miracle! (Fulfillment of Noah's curse, "A slave to slaves")

The greatest display of justice possible would have been the willful acquiescence of Pharaoh to the wishes of G-d! The parting of the sea and the destruction of Egypt would have been unnecessary.

Above all else would have been G-d's display of forgiveness and purpose. G-d has no need for

vengeance. G-d only desires awareness and acceptance of His purpose for creating the universe. Regardless of the 209 years of slavery and persecution G-d would have lovingly forgiven Pharaoh and Mitzrayim! One moment of honest awareness would have effected absolute forgiveness for the Egyptian nation and salvation for the world.

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