

COMING TO EGYPT

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Shemos

Coming To Egypt

These Divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: Tape #488 - Marrying Cousins? Good Shabbos!

The first pasuk [verse] of the Book of Shemos contains a strange expression: "And these are the names of the Children of Israel who are coming (ha'baim) to Egypt." [Shemos 1:1]. We would have expected the past tense of the verb for coming (she'ba-u), i.e. who came down (already). After all, this narration is history at this point.

Many commentaries explain that there was a fundamental difference between the original generation of Jews who came down to Egypt with Yaakov and the subsequent generations of Jews who were born in Egypt. The original generation never felt that they were putting down roots. That is why throughout their lives they were just "ha'baim mitzrayema" -- as if they were just now coming to Egypt. They were always of the mentality "I'm still coming, but I don't need to stay here."

"Yaakov did not go down to Egypt to settle permanently there, only to (temporarily) dwell there." [Passover Hagaddah]

Unfortunately, that was not the attitude of subsequent generations. This is the challenge of galus [exile]. After being somewhere for so many years, it is hard to look at it as anything other than 'home'. Jews lived in Poland for 1,000 years. The popular witticism for many years was that Poland was a contraction of the Aramaic expression "Poh lin" [here we will sleep]. Jews were in Aisheshok for 900 years! America hasn't existed for half that amount of time! The Jews in Poland thought they would be there forever. The Jews in Aisheshok thought Aisheshok would always be a Jewish village.

So too, the Jews in Egypt felt that Egypt was their home. The Kli Yakar points out regarding the expression "Va'Ya-atzmu bim'od me'od" [and they became strong, very much so] [Shemos 1:7] that

eventually there was a change in the mindset of the Jews in Egypt. They became wealthy, they became strong, and they set down roots.

I was recently very impressed by a simple fellow who gave me a ride when I was in New York not long ago. He was a Sephardic Jew, and by outward appearance didn't seem overtly very religious -- no hat, no beard, no payos. But he told me "I can't bring myself to buy a house in Brooklyn." He had a family and a mini-van but he lived in an apartment. He said that if he would buy a house in Brooklyn, he would be making a statement that he intended to put down roots and remain in galus. He did not want to do that.

I'm not saying that we all need to go out and sell our houses and move into apartments. But such an emotion -- from a simple lay person -- is the exact attribute the Torah ascribes to the first generation of Jews who came down to Egypt with Yaakov -- they always saw themselves as merely "ba-im" (just now coming) to Egypt.

Somehow, we need to work on such an emotion so as not to entrap and entrench ourselves in the exile.

Moshe Grows and Grows

The Torah's brief narration about Moshe's youth contains the following narration: "The boy grew up (va'Yigdal haYeled) and she (Yocheved) brought him to the daughter of Pharaoh and he was a son to her. She called his name, Moshe, as she said, 'For I drew him from the water.'" [Shemos 2:10] The very next pasuk says, "It happened in those days that Moshe grew up (va'Yigdal Moshe) and went out to his brethren and saw their burdens..."

The Ramba"n asks what the two expressions of "va'yigdal" (he grew up) are referring to. The Ramba"n suggests that the first va'yigdal refers to Moshe's physical growth. The boy grew up into an adult. The second va'yigdal refers to the growth of Moshe in a spiritual sense. In our terminology, the meaning of the second va'yigdal is that Moshe Rabbeinu became an 'Adam Gadol' [a great personality]. What indicates that the second pasuk means that he was a great person? The fact that he went out to his brethren to see their suffering indicates that he was a great personality. The definition of greatness in the Jewish nation is empathizing with the pain of others.

This is what Chazal meant when they spoke of the attribute of one who "carries the burden with his friend". A person is "carrying the burden with his friend" when his friend's problems become his own problems.

This could be the meaning of the blessing we give baby boys at the time of circumcision: "This little one will become a Gadol [big one]." For a baby, there is only one person in the world who exists -- himself. Whenever he has a problem, he cries. He does not care about anything else. The blessing we give every baby is that he should lose this self-centeredness. "Now you are a katan [small one], represented by your total dependence and total self-centeredness. In the future, you should grow

up to be concerned about others as much as you are about yourself."

I recently read a story about a student of Rav Hutner. The student called his Rebbe with the wonderful news that his wife just had a baby girl. Rav Hutner responded, "Call me back in 15 minutes." The student took this as somewhat of a put down, as if Rav Hutner was saying "I'm too busy for you and your good news now, call me back in 15 minutes."

In fact, however, when the student called Rav Hutner, Rav Hutner explained, "When you called, there was a fellow sitting in my office who unfortunately has not been able to have children with his wife for many years. What could I tell you at that time?" It was worth it to take the wind out of the sails of this one student for a short time, because it would have caused pain of far greater magnitude for the other person. Rav Hutner was a person who "carried the burden of his fellow man." He could rapidly think on his feet and calculate exactly how to respond or not respond to the call while in the midst of the meeting with the other fellow.

This is the definition of "gadlus" and this is the meaning of "va'yigdal". First Moshe became an adult, a mature human being. Later he became a great person (adam gadol), by virtue of the fact that he empathized and commiserated with his fellow Jew.

Pharaoh Was Concerned With His PR Image

The more things change, the more they stay the same. Pharaoh saw that his plan was not working -- the Jews were not being crushed. "On that day, Pharaoh ordered the taskmasters over the people and its guards, saying, 'You shall not continue to give stubble to the people to make the bricks as yesterday and the day before yesterday; let them go and gather stubble for themselves. But the total of the bricks that they were making yesterday and before yesterday you shall place upon them -- do not reduce it...' [Shemos 5:6-8]. In other words, they now had to work harder -- by obtaining their own straw -- but they must maintain the same production level.

I saw a comment from the Shemen HaTov: Why didn't Pharaoh just double the amount of bricks that he expected them to produce? Couldn't he accomplish the same goal of breaking their spirit by just doubling their quota? It would seem that such an approach would be more beneficial for the bottom line of the Egyptian economy -- they would wind up with more bricks.

The Shemen HaTov answers that Pharaoh was using a tactic of politicians from time immemorial. Politicians often avoid "raising taxes". Instead, they charge user fees and remove exemptions. They squeeze more money out of us but they want to seem like nice guys. Pharaoh, too, was concerned about what they would say about him on the nightly news, so to speak. He was not even running for office, but he still did not want people to say that he was a tyrant. Doubling their brick quota would seem unreasonable. It was preferable for him to break their spirit with a seemingly more humane decree.

People such as Pharaoh act like Zimri but they want the reward of Pinchas. They want to have good

PR and have people think that they are righteous. But their actions are mischievous and even diabolical. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

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This write-up was adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Torah Tape series on the weekly Torah portion. The complete list of halachic topics covered in this series for Parshas Shemos are provided below:

Tape # 038 - Husbands at Childbirth
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