

THE ORPHANS WERE NOT FORGOTTEN

by Rabbi Yissocher Frand

Parshas Beshalach

The Orphans Were Not Forgotten

These divrei Torah were adapted from the hashkafa portion of Rabbi Yissocher Frand's Commuter Chavrusah Tapes on the weekly portion: CD #887 Rejoicing At The Death of Reshoim -Recommended or Not? Good Shabbos!

The pasuk in the beginning of the parsha says that when the Jewish people left Egypt, they were 'chamushim' [Shemos 13:18]. Rashi cites two interpretations of the word 'chamushim'. There are in fact at least 3 seemingly disparate interpretations of this word found among the commentaries.

According to one interpretation in Rashi, 'chamushim' comes from the word 'chomesh' (one-fifth) and indicates that only one fifth of the Jewish population in Egypt merited to leave, while the other eighty percent died during the 3 days of Darkness (Plague #9).

The Targum Yerushalmi interprets the word 'chamushim' to mean they were armed. Rashi alludes to this interpretation, but seems to interpret it to mean that they were literally armed with weapons. The Targum Yerushalmi, on the other hand, interprets it figuratively - they were 'armed with good deeds'.

The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel gives a third interpretation: 'Chamushim' means that everyone went out with 5 children.

Superficially, these are three disparate interpretations: (a) one-fifth of the population left; (b) armed with good deeds; (c) bringing along 5 children each.

The interpretation of the Targum Yonasan ben Uziel is statistically mind-boggling. Shall we presume that everyone had exactly 5 children? In addition, even if that was the family size of each family unit, but the implication is that they were all children, of roughly the same age! What is the meaning of this?

The Be'er Yosef by Rav Yosef Salant gives a beautiful interpretation. He links all 3 seemingly

independent interpretations of the word 'chamushim' into a single narrative with a single theme. He writes that if four-fifths of the Jewish people died during the Plague of Darkness, one can likely presume that specifically the adults died. Granted, the adults might have sinned and been unworthy of the Exodus, but how can we speak of the "sins of young children"?

Therefore, Rav Salant suggests that the children of these 'wicked Jews' did not die, which would imply that four-fifths of the Jewish children at the time of the Exodus were orphans. Imagine the scene - tens of thousands of little Jewish orphans wandering around. Who is going to take care of them? What is going to be with them? The answer is that every one of the remaining Jewish families 'chipped in' and said, "We'll take these orphans with us." Thus, mathematically, every remaining family adopted four families worth of orphans.

Therefore, when the Targum Yonasan ben Uziel says "five children", he does not mean that everyone went out with 5 children. He means that everyone went out with 5 families worth of children - their own set and the set of four other families worth of orphans whose parents died during the Plague of Darkness! This then fits in perfectly with the interpretation of the Targum Yerushalmi - they went out armed with good deeds! The good deeds were the fact that they adopted the poor orphans left over from the people killed during the ninth plague.

The Targum Yonasan ben Uziel is suggesting an amazing thing, which was a source of extraordinary merit. Consider that after the Holocaust, there were undoubtedly thousands of orphans. What happened to these kids? This is equivalent to everyone who survived the Holocaust taking in X number of orphans. Anyone who takes in an orphan is doing an amazing act of chessed. However, we must understand that these people were refugees themselves. They were not people who were living a normal life who then decided to "take in a few orphans". These were displaced people themselves. These people did not know where tomorrow's bread was coming from! When Klal Yisrael adopted the attitude "We can't leave these kids in Egypt" and dismissed all the natural concerns about their own welfare and the welfare of their own families in a time of great uncertainty, this was a tremendous act of courage and selflessness. This brought them great merit. This "armed them" with the merit of great acts of kindness.

Thus, all three interpretations: "one-fifth", "five children", and "armed with acts of kindness" dovetail together, according to the insight of Rav Yosef Salant.

Rav Matisyahu Solomon, the Lakewood Mashgiach, adds a beautiful appendage to this insight. The Medrash Rabbah in Eicha on the pasuk, "We were orphans who had no father" [Eicha 5:3] states that G-d tells the Jewish people "Because you cried out to me that you were like orphans who had no father, I will send to you a redeemer who has no father or mother." This refers to Esther in the time of Haman's decree, about whom it is written, "And he raised Hadassah who is the same as Esther the daughter of his uncle, for she had neither father nor mother..." [Esther 2:7].

Rav Matisyahu Solomon interprets this Medrash: There is a special 'segulah' [virtuous Attribute] in the

way the Almighty responds to orphans. The Almighty testifies that He will inevitably respond to the cry of the orphan: "If you will persecute him such that he cries out to Me, I will surely hear his cry." [Shemos 22:22] Hashem is the Father of Orphans. When people inflict pain on orphans, G-d says, "This is My Business!" Watch out for a father or mother when someone dares to startup with his or her children. So too, one must "watch out", as it were, for G-d's punishment if he dares start up with orphans and abuses or persecutes them. The Rambam defines this as a "sealed covenant" (Bris Kerusah) that the Almighty will respond to the cries of help from an orphan. [Matanos L'Aniyim 10:3]

When Klal Yisrael said (in the above quoted pasuk in Eicha), "We are like orphans who have no father" (referring to the Jews crying out in the time of Haman's decree), it guaranteed a response from the Almighty. Hashem agreed that a response had to be forthcoming, but He said (as it were) "I need a catalyst." The catalyst was Mordechai. Since Mordechai raised Hadassah (Esther), who was an orphan and had no parents, this act of kindness triggered the Divine Response that brought about the salvation from Haman's decree. The Medrash says that Mordechai could have escaped the decree and returned to Eretz Yisrael, but he refused to leave Persia because he was concerned about Esther's welfare. This was the 'spark' -- the "arousal from below" - that in turn set off the "arousal from Above" which brought the redemption.

Rav Matisyahu Solomon says that with this background, we can now understand why Klal Yisrael in Egypt needed the merit of taking out all these thousands of orphans. When Klal Yisrael (despite all the reasons for not doing so) acted like the "father of orphans" and each took in four families worth of children with no parents, this (as the Targum Yerushalmi comments) was a tremendous merit, which triggered the Divine Response of G-d, the Father of all orphans.

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 B'Shalach are provided below:

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