

PARSHAS SHEMOS

תשפ"ב

When Klal Yisroel were in Egypt, Yaakov and Yosef's vision was that they should be separate from the Egyptians. In Parshas Vayigash, Yosef convinced Pharaoh to let Klal Yisroel live in their own ghetto in Goshen. Yosef's excuse was that the brothers brought all their flocks and cattle with them to Egypt. Why? Because they have a different lifestyle of shepherding animals – one which the Egyptians are disgusted by – so they cannot live together. He added that Yaakov's family has only come to live here temporarily out of necessity because there is no grazing land in Canaan. So Pharaoh allowed them to live wherever they wanted, and Yosef chose Goshen.

However, the last verse in Vayigash says Klal Yisroel were "ochazu boh". There are many different interpretations of this phrase. Targum Yonason explains that Klal Yisroel stopped being shepherds and started to cultivate fields and orchards. Apparently they started to feel self-conscious about being nomadic shepherds. They wanted to feel like they belonged somewhere instead of constantly wandering from place to place to find adequate grazing land. They wanted to fit in to the agricultural lifestyle of Egypt.

In the beginning of this week's parsha we read that as the Jewish population exploded, they moved out of Goshen and started to live among the Egyptians – obviously no longer shepherds. At this moment, the Egyptians turned against them. But they didn't simply start persecuting Klal Yisroel outright. That would have been impossible. They took time and effort to come up with an elaborate scheme and pretense to fool the Jews into becoming their slaves. They made them work בפרך. This word has many possible meanings. One of them is פה פה – with gentle words. The midrash explains that Pharaoh convinced the Jews to become slaves by establishing a national volunteer service. All the Jews (besides Shevet Levi) rushed to enlist to show what good Egyptian citizens they are, and Pharaoh slowly gave exemptions to all the native Egyptians and only the Jews remained working.

Rashi gives a different explanation for the word פרך. Pharaoh wanted to break the Jews psychologically as well as physically. Why was this necessary? Because the Jews were a powerful people. You cannot control a powerful population unless you control them psychologically and break their will to rebel. פרך means he would give tasks to people which were completely unsuitable to their talents and abilities – removing all satisfaction from doing the task. With their spirit broken, he could control them.

In addition, Pharaoh instructed the Ivri midwives to kill all the male infants as they delivered them. But they refused to obey and even helped the boys live. Why did the midwives not comply with Pharaoh's order? Some would explain that they were motivated by national identity and national survival. Of course the midwives would naturally want to resist helping Pharaoh wipe out their own Jewish nation! This notion of worrying about the klal rather than each individual Jew – which has become popular in the orthodox Jewish world recently – actually has its roots in socialism which believes the greatest value comes from promoting the good of society. The individual must sacrifice for the national good and his individual needs do not count.

But the Torah tells us otherwise. It says they refused because they had fear of Heaven.

It is very nice to worry about the Jewish people, but that misses the point. A sense of devotion to Jewish peoplehood which leaves out yiras shomayim is worthless. The only thing that really matters to

Hashem, the achievements that really last, are those which are based on yiras shomayim. It was this deep fear of Hashem which gave these two women the strength to stand up to a brutal despot giving them a direct order.

Later, the verse doesn't say Hashem rewarded the midwives for saving Klal Yisroel. It says He rewarded them for their display of yiras shomayim – that is all that counts,

Then we have the story of Moshe being enlisted by Hashem to negotiate the release of Klal Yisroel from Egypt. Hashem tells Moshe to first go to the Bnei Yisroel and tell them Y-K-V-K, the G-d of the Ivrim, has come to redeem them. What is the meaning of "Ivrim" in this context? It is downplaying the uniqueness of their relationship with Hashem. Every people, every nation has their own deity who guides them and watches over them, and the Ivrim are just another people who have their G-d who watches over them whose name happens to be Y-K-V-K.

But when Moshe went to Pharaoh, Moshe changed the wording to "Elokei Yisroel". Yisroel is a whole different level – not just another tribe which used to live in Canaan and has a god. We are a different nation who lives always before Hashem. Pharaoh responds: "Who is Hashem that I should listen to Him?" The midrash explained that Pharaoh opened up his book of deities and didn't find this Y-K-V-K in it. So he didn't have to pay any attention to Him to let Yisroel leave Egypt. Then Moshe backtracks and says the G-d of the Ivrim came to us and we want to worship Him after a three-day journey in the desert.

Pharaoh still refuses. He accuses Moshe and Aharon of encouraging the Jews to slack off in their work – giving them an excuse to stop working to worship their deity. This means they have too much time on their hands to think and consider their situation! He isn't controlling them 100%! So they now have to work even harder. Be totally occupied by the extra pressure to keep up with the production quotas and not be distracted by false words – ואל ישעו בדברי שקר.

What were these דברי שקר?

We knew that when Moshe was still growing up in the royal palace, he came to Pharaoh to recommend that the Jewish slaves be given a day off. He reasoned that they would be more productive if they didn't have to work all seven days every week non-stop – eventually they will collapse. They can replenish their strength and work much harder for the other six days if you give them Shabbos off. Pharaoh agreed. What did they do on Shabbos? They could have done a lot of things – like get drunk or play basketball. But instead they studied the megillos that they brought with them from Canaan, the Toros from the Ovos which they were learning in the yeshivos. That's what occupied all the Jews in Egypt on Shabbos while they were enslaved.

Pharaoh understood that if he can't control their minds, he cannot control their bodies. Klal Yisroel knows instinctively that only by learning Torah, will they have an independent identity. Although they used Hebrew names and language and dress in Egypt which kept them distinct, we know this wouldn't stop assimilation. The mass emigration of the Jews of Eastern Europe to the West in the 19th and early 20th century was a disaster because they clung to a superficial form of Jewish identity without Torah. They had Jewish burial societies and free loan societies to be Jewish. But if you don't hold on to limud Torah, you won't remain Jewish for more than a generation.

Klal Yisroel in Egypt used that one day off from work for learning Torah. It is very revealing. People engage in all sorts of distractions and past-times to occupy themselves when they aren't working – sports, games, entertainment, alcohol, etc. What a person does in his spare time is very indicative of who you are as person. Pharaoh realized that if the Jews are learning the Torah from the Torah during their spare time, they will maintain their own independent identity and they won't fully identify as his slaves. He has to make them work longer and harder to distract them from these ideas.

Pharaoh is out to break Klal Yisroel and learning Torah protected them.

What do we learn from all of this? How is it relevant to us?

There can be many motivations for why Jews do what they do – national identity, national responsibility, etc. But only one thing will have an impact for generations to come – acting out of yiras shomayim. These midwives gave birth to botei kehunoh and botei malchus which will remain till the end of human history.

How does a person maintain his identity while slaving away at work? It is by being connected to Torah. This keeps us as independent individuals who will not be broken. Because once a people's spirit is broken, it takes a very long time to forge a new, free identity. The blacks from Africa who were enslaved for hundreds of years prior to the Civil War were completely broken psychologically. A life of slavery was all they knew for generations. You can't just declare them free people and expect them to feel like normal members of society as if nothing happened. Human beings don't work that way. It takes many generations until they can build themselves up psychologically and feel like regular free people.

But Klal Yisroel, just 50 days after they left Egypt, were already capable of accepting the Torah on Har Sinai. Why? Because already in Egypt, their spirit wasn't broken and they maintained a separate identity through limud Torah. True, Klal Yisroel wanted to integrate and assimilate into Egyptian society, but something stopped them. Pharaoh wanted them

to feel completely subservient to Egypt with no distinct identity, but he failed. Why? Because of the power of limud haTorah.

When the Russian government wanted the Jews of Russia to assimilate to solve their "Jewish problem," they focused on changing the yeshiva curriculum. Why? Because the maskilim helping the Russian government knew that learning Chumash and Tanach wouldn't be an obstacle to assimilation. Only Torah Shebaal Peh will be an obstacle. They knew that this is the glue which keeps us Jewish and prevents assimilation. This is why the Czar went after learning Torah in yeshivos, and as long as we insisted on keeping up the level of learning, he couldn't break us.

The next strategy Pharaoh used to break the spirit of Klal Yisroel was to have some Jews be responsible for the Jewish slaves to keep up with their quotas. If the quota wasn't met, those overseeing Jews would be whipped and beaten by the Egyptian task-masters. This would encourage Jews to hit other Jews to work harder – to avoid being beaten themselves. But they refused to do this. They took the blows from the Egyptians rather than give the blows to their fellow Jews.

One final idea. Sometimes Hashem sets up a situation which, at the time it is happening, doesn't make any sense. It seemed to be totally counterproductive to first send Moshe to negotiate with Pharaoh – because it gave Pharaoh the excuse to accuse the Jews of laziness and increase the burden of slavery! Moshe complained to Hashem that since he came, things immediately got worse instead of better! Hashem responds that His method of negotiating and manipulating Pharaoh before he agrees to release Klal Yisroel has a deep purpose. You may not appreciate it now, but that's not your business. You need to do what you were sent to do, and in the end, you will see how every step of the process – even this first step – was necessary for the geuloh.

Over the next few weeks, we will try to understand this plan and why Hashem needed to set up this whole sequence of events before taking Klal Yisroel out.