

PARSHAS SHEMOS

תשפ"ד

Sefer Shemos is a brand-new part of the Torah. Sefer Bereishis is about great individuals who laid the groundwork for Klal Yisroel. Now we begin to discuss Klal Yisroel's development as a nation.

How should one translate the term "Bnei Yisroel"? The children of a person called Yisroel – namely Yaakov? Or is it the term for the new nation that was founded by Yaakov called "Bnei Yisroel"?

The first posuk in the parsha says:

וְאֵלֶּה שְׁמוֹת בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל הַבָּאִים מִצְרָיִמָּה אֶת יַעֲקֹב אִישׁ וּבֵיתוֹ בָּאוּ:

We see that Yaakov himself is included in the group of people called "Bnei Yisroel", so it must be referring to the entire nation and not just Yaakov's descendants.

It is a brand-new concept. Their national history will be followed closely throughout the generations till today as the center of world civilization. Yaakov worked his entire life to be zoche to raise the shivtei Koh. On his death-bed, Yaakov confirmed he was successful when his 12 sons said Shema Yisroel with complete conviction that they are committed to the same ideas that Yaakov is committed to.

Yosef and his entire generation died, and then the slavery of Egypt started. As long as a single member of that generation lived, the image of Yaakov as a real human being lived on and there was no shibbud. But once they all died, Yaakov became a distant historical figure and ceased to impact them as intensely as before.

Bnei Yisroel started to multiply and spread out of the Jewish ghetto of Goshen. Hashem is trying to produce a nation in Egypt. He gave them a tremendous brocho to rapidly increase their numbers and made a population explosion. Yaakov's vision was to remain separate from Egyptian society in order to maintain their unique identity and thereby be safe from persecution. But Klal Yisroel was now located inside the most powerful and advanced country in the ancient world. They were curious and impressed with Egyptian culture and they didn't want to be confined to the ghetto anymore. But once they branched out and started to integrate, the persecutions begin.

The posuk says:

וַיָּקָם מֶלֶךְ הַדָּשׁ עַל מִצְרַיִם אָשֶׁר לֹא יָדַע אֶת יוֹסֵף:

But how could this be? Yosef ruled Egypt for 80 years and turned it into the wealthiest and most advanced empire in the civilized ancient world! How could Yosef ever be forgotten? The answer is that Pharaoh had an agenda that required that he forget the hakoras hatov he had for Yosef. His agenda was to follow the rule of history that when Klal Yisroel tries to assimilate into the non-Jewish society, Hashem brings an irrational hatred for the Jews.

At the end of the parsha, Hashem tells Moshe to go to Pharaoh and tell him that he wants to bring Klal Yisroel out to the wilderness to worship Hashem. As a result, Pharaoh instructs his taskmasters to increase the workload on the Jews so that they will not be distracted by the divrei sheker. What was Pharaoh referring to? The midrash tells us that when Klal Yisroel came down to Egypt, they brought with them scrolls of the stories of the Ovov which taught them their history and their identity. Pharaoh wanted to get control over Klal Yisroel completely – mind and body. So while he controlled their body with slave labor, he saw that he wasn't controlling their minds since they were studying these scrolls during their leisure time – which was Shabbos. A person is where his mind is, and their minds were preoccupied with the stories of the Ovov

which gave them their independent identity as Jews. Pharaoh wanted to control their minds that they should have no identity other than being his slaves, so he forced them to work on Shabbos and have no leisure time for learning the scrolls.

In Parshas Vayigash, Yosef and his sons are counted among the seventy souls who were coming from Canaan to Egypt. But how could this be if Yosef and his sons are already in Egypt? The answer is that Yosef achieved an incredible feat. Even though he and his family were in the elite class of Egyptian royal society, he managed to keep his mind and the minds of his children in Canaan among his own family. A person is where his mind is, and Yosef and his sons also moved – mentally – along with Yaakov's family from Canaan to Egypt.

So Pharaoh needs to take away this extra time and prevent Klal Yisroel's minds from being with the Ovov and having an independent identity.

There is a very big mussar haskel to be taken from this – what a person does during his leisure time shows a person where his mind is. As a frum Jew in the business world, you need to know how to maintain your identity as a ben Torah. When you work at a job, you often look forward to enjoying free time. But what are you looking forward to? Traveling to distant locations or enjoying luxury hotels? Does Shabbos afternoon mean relaxing with Mishpacha magazine? Or do you look forward to learning and mastering a challenging new sugya?

Back to the beginning of the parsha.

The midrash says Klal Yisroel wanted to become like the Egyptians so they stopped doing bris miloh. Why? Because this bris is stamped on their bodies and makes them physically distinct, and they don't want to be noticed as different. There is an interesting machlokes between the Netziv and the Beis Halevi if the Jews literally stopped performing bris miloh or they made cosmetic surgeries to reconstruct the skin in a way that concealed their bris miloh, which is assur derabbonon. These two opinions reflect two different approaches to assimilation. One approach is to simply stop doing the mitzvot – throw everything away and adopt a new identity. The other approach is to maintain a symbolic connection to Judaism and technically fulfill the mitzvot, but you are acting and thinking exactly like a non-Jew. In the end, it doesn't matter to the non-Jews which approach you take – they hate you either way. We discovered this rather abruptly during the current war. All the liberal Jews who thought that the non-Jewish world approved of them because of their extremely liberal politics and morality experienced a very rude awakening.

Mrs. Lifschitz was kidnaped in the raid on October 7th. It turns out Mrs. Lifschitz was sympathetic to the Palestinians in Gaza her entire life. In fact, many of the southern yishuvim overrun during the raid were inhabited by very sympathetic leftist Israelis. But Hamas didn't care. They slaughtered and kidnapped and raped everyone they met. In their charter they say that they want to kill all Jews. When Mrs. Lifshitz was freed, she was able to meet with the head of Hamas and she was very upset. She told him: why did you attack these yishuvim? We are so sympathetic to your cause! You should have attacked the settlements in the territories and terrorized the settlers instead!

Incredible. Even after all she saw and experienced, she could not comprehend that the Arabs hate all Jews everywhere in the world and want them all dead – not just those occupying the disputed territories. She was worshipping the religion called liberalism where everyone can get along and completely integrate into one human society. She

couldn't fathom that a Jew is a Jew and a Goy is a Goy and there is nothing you can do to erase those differences.

Whether we like it or not, we represent Hashem in this world and this is how the world looks at us. It puts us in a very dangerous situation because the non-Jews would rather forget about Hashem and live their lives the way they want.

Hashem sent Moshe to represent Him to Pharaoh, and Moshe presents himself as a messenger of Hashem Elokei Yisroel. Pharaoh says: who is Hashem that I should listen to Him? The midrash explains that the concept of Hashem – a Being who is all-powerful and all-knowing – was something completely foreign in the ancient world. Avodah is about local spiritual forces competing for domination, and morality is completely relative. There are no absolutes. Pharaoh would not accept that there is one absolute power with one absolute code of conduct and that there is a people who represent Him.

Avimelech saw Sorah and kidnapped her in order to force himself upon her. When he attempted to rape her, Hashem commanded him to stop. Avimelech didn't relent until a maloch was sent to physically restrain him. But when he confronts Avrohom the next morning, he accuses Avrohom of being the immoral one because he lied about Sorah being his sister! Avimelech is the tzaddik – completely innocent – even though he was the one who kidnapped an innocent woman and wanted to rape her! So Avrohom has to explain: why did he have to lie about Sorah being his sister? Because Avrohom knows that in a society where human beings make the laws of the land, the laws can be bent and twisted to justify anything immoral that they want to do.

I'm sure that in Germany during WWII, if any German citizen killed another German citizen, he would be convicted and tried for murder and be considered horribly immoral by German society. But killing Jews? That's totally fine! They aren't really human and they need to be exterminated like vermin. You change the laws and the definitions of morality to fit whatever is needed at the moment because there is no concept of absolutes. So Avrohom has to be careful around such people to avoid being killed.

So Pharaoh can understand the idea of the G-d of the Ivrim – a local god for a specific group of people like every other nation. But he can't accept Hashem – Y-K-V-K – and people who represent Him in this world. He cannot accept a people who claim there is one G-d with one set of rules which dictate right and wrong for everybody at all times. These people need to be stopped. This is why the Jews are always in danger from the rest of the world. We represent an idea that is a threat to their entire way of life that they must resist and eliminate.

In the 1880's there was a tremendous violent spike in anti-Semitism in Russia and Jews needed to find a way to solve it. One solution was Zionism – make the Jews like all other nations with their own country and flag and language, and no one will care if we exist. (But we see

that 140 years later, the main source that fuels Anti-Semitism all over the world today is none other than Zionism!) The other solution was Communism. Unite all people into one single human society. Eliminate all differences between people and make the idea of separate nations irrelevant. That way no people will feel the need to persecute other people because we are all included in the same society as equals. Some of the most active Communists in Russia at the beginning of the movement were Jews – Marx and Engels were two Jews who wrote the original Communist Manifesto which started the whole philosophy. Leon Trotsky was a prominent leader of the Bolshevik Revolution who was later assassinated by Lenin and Stalin who were vicious anti-Semites.

The last group were the Gedolei Yisroel. They explained that anti-Semitism comes from the desire for Jews to assimilate. Rav Meir Simcha famously pointed out that German Jews were the first to start the program of Reform and mass assimilation – saying Berlin is Yerushalayim and the German language is holy. He predicted long in advance of the Holocaust that there will be a massive backlash by the Germans in response, and large-scale destruction of European Jewry will result. The Netziv and Beis Halevi wrote similar things.

We see all this unfolding today. We represent Hashem in this world and this makes us a target for annihilation. Hitler wrote openly that we are the ones who are stopping the rest of the world from living their lives like animals. The Jews introduced the concept of a conscience and the idea of absolute right and wrong and he would not rest until every single Jew is gone from the world. As long as a single Jew remains, the ideas that Jews have brought to the world will remain and he cannot tolerate this. The world prefers to have relative morality.

How do we stay safe? Not by being a member of the United Nations. It doesn't help – it only hurts. We need to be different and maintain those differences on every level. At Har Sinai, we became a mamleches kohanim and Goy Kodosh. This is our national identity – we are dedicated to spiritual goals and the service of Hashem.

In the past few years, Hashem has brought radical change in all of world society. The Coronavirus pandemic produced a social revolution from the George Floyd riots. We are going through a unique period of history. I will discuss this at length in a future talk. At the end of history, Edom will go down and limud haTorah will spread on a scale that was never seen before. Then there will be a final battle between Yisroel and Yishmoel about who is in control of Eretz Yisroel. But our job now in times of war is limud haTorah b'iyun. The Netziv says that this particular type of Torah is what saves Klal Yisroel. We will go through these sources in more detail in the future.

But we have to remember that we are a fundamentally different nation – we represent Hashem in this world and we are not like any other nation.