

PARSHAS VAEIRA

תשפ"ד

Last week, we read that Moshe Rabbeinu confronted Pharaoh and presented to him a radical idea: A. Klal Yisroel are leaving Egypt. B. There is a Being called Y-K-V-K Who has total power over the entire universe. He decides that there is absolute morality of right and wrong in the world. The wide-spread notions that understood that there are only local gods controlling specific forces and control different nations, and that any group of people can set up any rules of morality they want to suit them, is about to be permanently upended.

Klal Yisroel are leaving Egypt to serve Hashem at Har Sinai.

There is a question: Moshe Rabbeinu knew that Klal Yisroel aren't just leaving for three days. He knows they are leaving for good, and Hashem is going to use tremendous force to make sure the Egyptians allow them to leave and never come back. So why pretend to engage in all these negotiations and back-and-forth between Moshe and Pharaoh to get him to agree? Why is Moshe playing this game when he knows how it must end?

In next week's parsha, Pharaoh agrees to send the people but wants them to leave their animals behind to ensure they return. Moshe Rabbeinu responds that we need to take everything with us. Why? Because we won't know what Hashem will demand of us when we serve Him. He may demand everything we have! This is an important idea. When Klal Yisroel left Egypt, they weren't leaving slavery for freedom. They will remain slaves always. But they can decide at Har Sinai to become slaves to Hashem Who can demand everything from them, or if they want, they can go back and return to being slaves to Pharaoh.

In the beginning of this week's parsha, Hashem says very clearly that the Source of all existence and power in this world is deciding to take Klal Yisroel out of Egypt. Why? He made a bris with Avrohom Ovinu and He sees their suffering. Then we have the four statements of geuloh which the Yerushalmi says correspond to the four cups of wine we drink at the Pesach Seder. There are four levels of shibbud, and geuloh from that shibbud.

The first aspect of slavery was the attempt to break Klal Yisroel by destroying them physical and psychologically. This would enable Pharaoh to control them completely. There was back breaking labor. Then there was labor that would destroy them psychologically. Strong people were given trivial tasks and weak people impossible tasks. No sense of any achievement. Break them physically and psychologically.

A slave is not an individual with his own identity. The owner determines everything about his slave. Pharaoh made sure Klal Yisroel did the kind of work that deprived them of any sense of achievement and self-worth.

When Moshe first came and asked for freedom, Pharaoh said increase the work so that they do not think about false ideas. Chazal tell us that they were not working on Shabbos. They used the free time to learn the teachings of the Ovos. Pharaoh took away Shabbos to deprive them of the time they had every week to read the scrolls of the Ovos which gave them their identity as a separate nation. Pharaoh wanted to control their minds as well as their bodies. If their minds are in Torah, they cannot be broken.

There is an interesting halacha that we only say one brocho of Birkas haTorah for the entire day. Even though when we finish davening, we may be off working the rest of the day, we still need not make a new

brocho at night when we learn again. Because there is no hefsek in learning if your mind is preoccupied the entire day with thoughts of Torah.

So the first level of geuloh is to stop the back-breaking labor which was designed to break the spirit of a human being. People have to be given tasks where they get a sense of achievement and self-worth.

The second freedom is the freedom from the anonymity of slave labor. A slave's work is never his. It is his master's achievement. He cannot take pride and say this is my work. A modern example of the anonymity of some corporate work is the discovery of plastic, which changed the entire world. But incredibly, no-one has taken credit for it. It was discovered by a chemist who worked for DuPont, and because he was an employee of this chemical company when he discovered it, the company owns his discovery and he gets no credit for it! When you are a slave who can be ordered around and be told to do one thing one day and an entirely different thing the next, you don't get any gratification from your labor – your body is simply a tool of the master. He has no self-identity. He is responding to his master's command and he makes no decisions about his life.

There is a strange Rashi explaining why Avrohom didn't choose Eliezer's own daughter as a wife for Yitzchok. If Eliezer, the great talmid muvhak of Avrohom, who learned and taught all Avrohom's Torah and had total mastery over his middos and taivos, why isn't his daughter the obvious choice for Yitzchok? Rashi explains that Avrohom said: "I am boruch and you are orur. One who is boruch cannot join with someone who is orur." Eliezer asks, how is yichus more important? The answer is that Eliezer is a slave. Yes, he is a slave to Avrohom and all of Avrohom's ideals. But a slave has no identity of his own. If he would have a different master, he would adopt all the beliefs of that master too. He cannot be the continuation of the legacy of Avrohom which is above the here and now. Klal Yisroel are connected to something infinite which a slave cannot comprehend.

The first two levels of geuloh are to have an identity and a sense of achievement and self-worth. You have to be a person. People today don't know who they are.

After the first step, Klal Yisroel became free people – the physical shibbud ended. The anonymity ended. But now, what do you do with that freedom? The problem with emancipating the black slaves of the South in 1863 was that they had no social structure in which to channel that new freedom. They had no identity that they could adopt to replace their slave identity. So Hashem spends a year teaching Klal Yisroel who Hashem is and how He runs the world – through the 10 makkos. These makkos were an educational process.

The first makkoh was turning the Nile River into blood. To appreciate the effect this makkoh had on the Egyptians and Klal Yisroel, you need to understand the history of ancient Egypt and how they worshipped the Nile as the source of life. By turning the waters of the Nile into blood, Hashem was sending the most powerful message – that what they considered the source of life is really the source of death. Their gods are fake. The Chartumim needed to try to deny the power of Hashem, but by replicating this makkoh and turning the water into blood, they have been made complete hypocrites! They have been worshipping the Nile and were the priests of this worship, and they themselves turn their own belief system into a complete sheker! The irony here is indescribably deep.

Then, the Nile produces tzfardim which go out of the water and wreak complete havoc on the Egyptians. Again, the Nile Rivier is a destructive force. Hashem then makes kinim from the dust to show that Hashem is in total control over all forms of life. The Chartumim can't control things that are so small. They are forced to admit that Hashem is a power beyond anything they know from magic and the natural forces of the world. Then Hashem shows that He is an intelligent power that makes distinctions between Jew and Egyptian and knows everything that goes on in the world. Then there is makkas bechoros and the gilui Shechinoh.

This education took a year long in order to make Klal Yisroel ready for that gilui Shechinoh on the Seder night before they left Egypt. Hashem didn't just use overwhelming force to display His power. He was also giving reward and punishment through the makkos – showing the dikduk hadin and Hashem's complete hashgocho over everything. What we do with our bechiroh comes with a precise din and cheshbon. Yisro recognized this when he saw how kriyas Yam Suf was used by Hashem to give the exact punishment to each Egyptian who oppressed each Jew – middoh kenegged middoh. Nothing was forgotten. This world is not run blindly like a force of nature. There is hashgocho which is acting with total precision.

Once you are a free person who is aware of Hashem's dikduk hadin of se'char and onesh, then we go to the next level.

But you have to start out by first being a person who actually cares about life and knows that it is valuable – and not waste it on frivolous nonsense like young people today tend to do.

Once you understand that this world is run by Hashem to the finest detail, then Hashem can take Klal Yisroel out of Egypt to become His people. A Jew is Hashem's representative in this world. This is why He took us out of slavery. He made a bond between Him and us and this is the ultimate freedom. You have a choice to be a slave to Hashem which is the ultimate achievement and source of self-worth, or go back to being slaves to Pharaoh.

There is "Ani Hashem" and then there is "Ani Hashem Elokeichem." Hashem is our personal G-d who has a special unique relationship with us.

Then the pesukim have a fifth level – "And I will bring you to the Land..." But, aren't there only four cups at the Seder – not five?

The answer is that coming to Eretz Yisroel is not a separate level of freedom, that we get our own land. It isn't a value per se that is necessary to give us our national identity. Eretz Yisroel is a means to an end. The posuk in Tehillim says Eretz Yisroel is the ideal place to actualize Torah and mitzvos. But the bris we have with Hashem is universally applicable – in all places and at all times. We were given a special land to realize the bris to the maximum.

Moshe is bringing this message to Klal Yisroel who have been psychologically broken and deprived of their identity. Moshe is telling them they will get it back with the geuloh that is coming.

There is an interesting Ibn Ezra who expands on the midrash. Miriam was a neviah before Moshe Rabbeinu was born and was only the sister of Aharon. She predicted that her parents will give birth to the one who will take Klal Yisroel out of Egypt, and she insisted that her parents get married again in order to have this child. Moshe Rabbeinu was born and they all saw how remarkable he was, but eventually Yocheved was forced to abandon him to the river. Miriam follows behind to watch and see how the hashgocho would work to fulfill her nevuah. Bas Pharaoh comes out and adopts him, but she needs a Jewish woman to nurse him. Miriam offers to bring him to Yocheved, and then bring him back to Bas Pharaoh. So Moshe Rabbeinu is growing up in two homes simultaneously. He lived with Pharaoh and knew who he was, from close – and wasn't too impressed.

Being raised in Pharaoh's home gives Moshe the confidence to stand up to the most powerful emperor in the civilized world and not be intimidated by him. And this is why Klal Yisroel accept him as their leader as well.

This parsha tells us what leaving Egypt requires of Klal Yisroel. You need to be a person. A tzelem Elokim who has a sense of achievement and self-worth. Then you have to realize who Hashem is and what kind of absolute power He has over the entire universe. Then you have to understand there is hashgocho protis and a precise din of se'char and onesh for every action of the human being. Finally, you need to enter into a special relationship with Hashem. He will take care of you, and you will be His chosen nation in return, and you will represent Him in the world.

If you accept the offer, fine. But if not, you will go back to being a slave to Pharaoh.