

# PARSHAS SHEMOS

תשפ"ו

The parsha begins with saying there were 70 souls who came down to Egypt. Yosef and his children were included in this count of 70. Although the posuk says he was physically in Egypt already, Yosef was mentally still in Canaan. You are where your mind is. Yaakov managed to raise his children to feel they were still in Canaan, no matter where they went. Incredibly, Yosef himself was able to raise his children – who never lived in Canaan their entire lives – as if they were living with his family in Canaan!

The midrash tells us that at some point during the confrontation in Egypt between the brothers and Yosef, Menashe stamped his foot. The brothers reacted in amazement that this stomping is the kind that our family does at home! It means that Yosef was so connected with Yaakov and his family, the entire time, that his everyday mannerisms and body language expressed his upbringing in Yaakov's house. He conveyed every nuance of life in Canaan to his children. Yosef stayed the same person and never became someone else all those years in Egypt. This is why he was able to get through the nisoyon with Potifar's wife. He saw his father's image in his mind and he couldn't go through with it.

But then the generation – everyone who saw Yaakov while he was alive, and knew that they were different and stayed apart from the Egyptians – died out. A new generation arose who did not have that image of Yaakov Ovinu. They started to have the desire to integrate into Egyptian society. They spread out of Goshen and little-by-little started to assimilate.

Bnei Yisroel were in Egypt for a total of 210 years. The heavy subjugation started 127 years after they arrived because this is when they became assimilated. They stopped bris miloh which made them physically distinct. The midrash says immediately hatred began and then the slavery and the decrees started. A new Pharaoh came to power and started to make schemes to persecute the Jews.

But don't think this was Pharaoh's independent decision. Hashem really runs the world, and the people who seem to be in power are really puppets in Hashem's hand. They are being used by Hashem to achieve His goals. The first Beis Hamikdosh was destroyed by Nevuchadnezzar. Hashem allowed it to be destroyed because of the aveiros of avodo zoro, gilui arayos and shefichas domim. But that doesn't absolve Nevuchadnezzar of his decision to be the one to destroy it. Similarly, Titus is called 'Titus ha'rosho' by Chazal – even though Hashem decreed that the second Beis Hamikdosh should be destroyed because of the sin of sinas chinom. That doesn't absolve Titus for the evil things he did during the churbon. It is the same with Hitler and the Holocaust. Hashem uses evil people to achieve His goals.

Pharaoh became paranoid and started to make plans to enslave the Jews. This process was fascinating. Yosef set things up that Klal Yisroel would be supported financially by the Egyptian government and they didn't have to work. Pharaoh declared a mandatory national service and he was the first to volunteer. But Klal Yisroel volunteered, to show their loyalty to the country. At that moment, all the love that the Egyptians had for the Jews turned into extreme hatred.

We find the exact same process happening in Russia in the late 1800's. There was vicious anti-Semitism and suffering, and the Jews tried all kinds of solutions to end it. The Zionists thought if we become a normal nation with a homeland and a flag, the rest of the world would treat us like all other nations. But just the opposite happened. All the

anti-Semitism today comes from using Zionism as their excuse.

The Communists said if we all become communists and join the universal brotherhood of the working-class, we won't be identified as Jews and be treated as a separate people. But the opposite happened.

The Beis Halevi, the Netziv, the Ohr Someach, the Malbim, across the board, all of them say that when Jews try to assimilate, the non-Jews push back and force us to be different. Hashem will not allow the Jews to disappear and become lost in the non-Jewish world.

In Spain in 1492, the Jews were very integrated in their society more than in the rest of Europe. Then along came the Inquisition and ended all that integration.

The Jews of Poland at the time of Tach v'Tat were the most integrated into upper class of Polish society. There was even a Jew who was king for a day.

In the 20th century there was tremendous assimilation in all Western Europe, but the most was in Germany. And then the Nazis rose to power. Hashem never lets the Jews fully assimilate.

Now in Egypt, Chazal say the Jews stopped bris miloh. Some say that they actually stopped bris miloh. But some say initially it was a plastic surgery which made it look as though they didn't have a bris. These two shittos reflect two different ways Jews decide to assimilate. Some go off outright and drop Yiddishkeit altogether. But others want to hold on to the outer image of being Jewish, but become completely secular inside. They adopt all the ideas and attitudes of the non-Jewish world and begin to think and feel exactly like a non-Jew, while observing the mitzvos.

We all have to ask ourselves who we really are. What kind of identity do we really have? Torah isn't just a list of things to do and not do. It is an entire way of life and way of thinking. It is our identity.

The gemara says a ger is like a newborn child. He has no more family relationships with his old non-Jewish family. The Rambam in Pirush Mishnayos explains that when you become Jewish, your connection with your family is gone. You no longer share a core identity. Yiddishkeit takes over your entire identity and becomes the most important thing in your life.

When Yonah is on the ship sailing for Tarshish and the ship encounters this massive storm, the storm behaved very strangely. It was centered around the ship, but all around, the waters were calm. The sailors realized that something about the ship was causing the storm. They cornered Yonah and asked him: Who are you, where do you come from, what is your profession?

Some people identify most with their nationality or with their profession. Yonah said I am an Ivri and I fear Hashem – that is who I am and nothing else defines my identity. Ivri means I am different and there is nothing in common with any other people.

Klal Yisroel forget this on a regular basis.

The religious leader of the Jewish community that was expelled from Spain was the Chossid Yaavetz. He spoke up and provided a reason why this tragedy was happening to the Jews of Spain. He describes the educational system of this community. They learned Torah till a certain age and then they went off to university and never looked back. Torah became relegated to something kids learn and wasn't part

of a mature intellectual's interests. It was an interesting insight into why the tragedy happened.

There is a teshuvah of the Rivash – one of last gedolei Torah in Spain. He got a sheiloh from the Jews in Majorca and they wanted to go to non-Jewish courts to solve the dispute. He wrote that this means you feel more Spanish than Jewish and your days of surviving there as Jews are numbered. And in the end, they all converted.

But this doesn't happen suddenly. And Hashem makes sure the non-Jews push back and make sure the Jews are kept separate and never forget who they are.

But on the other side of things is Shevet Levi. They never stopped bris miloh, they never worshipped avodo zoro, and they kept learning Torah and continued the mesorah of the Ovos.

When Moshe Rabbeinu came down late, according to Klal Yisroel's cheshbon, they panicked because they were used to having a physical representation of Hashem. They needed to make a substitute. But the entire Shevet Levi stayed separate. They did not feel that panic – they never served avodo zoro in Egypt like the rest of Klal Yisroel.

In the brochos given to Shevet Levi by Moshe Rabbeinu in V'zos Habrocho, Moshe points out that Shevet Levi was never involved in all the quarrels and complaints Klal Yisroel had in the desert. Klal Yisroel routinely hankered to go back to Egypt when things got rough. But Shevet Levi never felt a connection to Egypt to desire to return.

Shevet Levi was able to execute their own relatives who worshipped the golden calf. Their biggest connection was to Hashem and that overcame all other connections to family, etc. What dominated their lives was their connection to Hashem. Because of that, Shevet Levi taught Torah to Klal Yisroel and did the avodah in the Beis Hamikdosh. What kept Shevet Levi so focused and dedicated to avodas Hashem beyond everything? Limud Torah. Those who wanted to assimilate became enslaved. They were always complaining and hankering to go back to Egypt.

But Klal Yisroel also clung to limud Torah even in their servitude. On Shabbos, when they had the day off, they spent their time reviewing the scrolls of the Ovos.

How did Klal Yisroel remain Jewish at all if they became so assimilated? It was these scrolls which connected them to their identity. We learn about this from what Pharaoh says after Moshe Rabbeinu comes to

demand their freedom. Pharaoh said we will increase their workload to distract them from their preoccupation with Torah. He was trying to get control of these people's minds with slavery. But they kept learning from these scrolls and retained who they were and couldn't be controlled.

There are two kinds of Jews. One wants to assimilate and also learns Torah on the side. The other makes the Torah the center of their lives.

What makes a Jew different is where his mind is. Yosef sent the message to Yaakov that he is still the Yosef he knew because he was still learning and reviewing the Torah that Yaakov taught him. It is the story of Klal Yisroel in Egypt and the story of Klal Yisroel throughout the generations.

The tragedy of the story of Jewish migration to the United States and England was that for the first time, the Jews arrived in large numbers without a yeshiva infrastructure to maintain a deep connection to limud haTorah. The result was that assimilation became the norm, until yeshivos took hold.

When we hold on to Torah, we can survive. We realize we are different – our minds think differently and we view the world differently – we connect to something else beyond this world.

But if you don't hold on to Torah, it becomes a very slippery slope. Klal Yisroel suffered for 83 years, and at the end of the golus, 80% of the Jews who made it to the end didn't want to leave! They so much wanted to become part of Egypt that they couldn't bring themselves to leave.

Those of us who grew up in the Western world have a problem with identity. We have a unique nisoyon nowadays that didn't exist 20 and 30 years ago. It used to be that when you came to Eretz Yisroel to learn, you were effectively cut off from the rest of the world. There was no instant communication and you could immerse yourself in a pure Torah environment and forge a new identity.

But now when you can continuously surround yourself with non-Jewish music, literature and entertainment, and you can't even imagine yourself going through the year without watching 250 pound men plowing into each other, it becomes a core part of your identity.

You have to ask yourself who you are and what you are at the core of your being. This is the question the sailors asked Yonah, and he replied: עברי אנוכי ואת ה' אלוקי השמים אני ירא.