

Parashat Beshalach 5782, 2022:

“And the Children of Israel Went Up”

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yecheiel, Chana bat Shmuel, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shoshana Elka bat Avraham, Tikvah bat Rivka Perel, Peretz ben Chaim, Chaya Sarah bat Reb Yechezkel Shraga, Shmuel Yosef ben Reuven, Shayndel bat Mordechai Yehudah, the *Kedoshim* of Har Nof, Pittsburgh, and Jersey City, and the *refuah shlaimah* of Mordechai HaLevi ben Miriam Tovah, Yocheved Dafneh bat Dinah Zehavah, and the health and safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* contains the sole instance of the word “*chamushim*” in the Five Books of the Torah:

“So G-d led the people around [by] way of the desert [to] the Red Sea, and the children of Israel went up *chamushim* from the land of Egypt.” (*Sefer Shemot* 13:18, this and all Tanach translations,

The Judaica Press Complete Tanach, with my emendations) *Midrash Mechilta* on our *pasuk*

suggests two *peshat*-level interpretations of our term:

Chamushim can only mean armed (*mezuyanim*). So, too does the text state: “...and you, all the warriors, shall cross over *chamushim* (armed) before your brothers, and you shall help them.” (*Sefer Yehoshua* 1:14) Another interpretation: *Chamushim* can only mean zealous (*mezurazin*). As the text states: “And the children of Reuven, and the children of Gad, and half the tribe of Menashe, passed over *chamushim* (in a zealous manner) before *b'nai Yisrael*, as Moshe had spoken to them.” (*Sefer Yehoshua* 4:12)

In addition, the *Mechilta* notes that *chamushim* is written without a *vav* (*shurook*) following the

Hebrew letter *mem*, which allows it to be midrashically viewed as a variant of *chamisha* (five),

chamishim (fifty) or *chamash maot* (five hundred):

Another explanation: One [Jew] out of five, and there are those that say one [Jew] out of fifty, and there are others who say one [Jew] out of five hundred [left Egypt] ... Rabbi Nehorai said, “I hereby take an oath based on the holiness of the *Korbanot* service in the *Beit HaMikdash* as my witness, that not even one out of five hundred [left Egypt]! Instead, uncountable numbers of Jews died in Egypt, and when did they die? They died during the three days of the Plague of Darkness... (Translations my own)

On measure, this grim passage leaves us wondering what occurred in Egypt to lead to this disastrous outcome. *Midrash Tanchuma* addresses this concern in its discussion of the Plague of Darkness:

What is the reason for the Plague of Darkness? ... [The Plague of Darkness took place] because there were those within the Jewish people who had patrons among the Egyptians. They had great honor and wealth and did not wish to leave Egypt. The Holy One blessed be He said to Himself, “if I bring a plague upon them that everyone can witness and they die, then the Egyptians will say, ‘just like this happened to us, so, too, did this happen to them.’” Therefore, He brought the Plague of Darkness on the Egyptians for three days, “They did not see each other, and no one rose from his place for three days ...” (*Sefer Shemot* 10:23, *Midrash Tanchuma*, Parashat Va’era section 14, translation my own)

In sum, the Plague of Darkness took place so that when the assimilationists among the Jews in Egypt refused to be redeemed, their death could not be witnessed by the Egyptians. This ensured that the latter would recognize the contrast between how the Almighty treated them and how he treated us. As the *Midrash Mechilta* continues and states: “They [the non-assimilationist Jews] buried their dead and thanked and gave praise to the Holy One blessed be He that their enemies did not see [the many burials] and rejoice in their downfall.” (Brackets my own)

A very different, and uplifting, approach to the term “*chamushim*” is offered by a number of the early Chasidic *rebbe*s. Like the *Mechilta*, they recognize that *chamushim* written without a *vav* enables it to be read as *chamishim* (fifty). Yet, unlike the *Mechilta* that focuses on the Jews who were excluded from the Exodus, these thinkers suggest that *chamishim* refers to the *chamishim sha’arei binah*, the 50 Gates of Understanding discussed in the *Talmud Bavli*, *Rosh Hashanah* 21b and *Nedarim* 38a, and various passages in the *Zohar*. One of the clearest explanations of this position is presented by Rabbi Ya’akov Yosef of Polonne *zatzal* (1710-1784) in his Torah commentary, *Tzafnat Paneach*:

And *b’nai Yisrael* went up from the Land of Egypt through *binah*, the 50th gate of *kedushah* (holiness) and *chasidut* (piety). [In so doing,] they left behind the 50 Gates of *Tumah* (Impurity)

[of Egypt] and moved toward the 50 Gates of Holiness; and this is the freedom [that is symbolized] through the order [and intrinsic meaning] of the [Four] Cups [of Wine] on the first night of *Pesach*... (Parashat Beshalach, translation and brackets my own)

As we find in many other sources, Rav Ya'akov Yosef views Egypt as the preeminent place of *tumah* in the ancient world. As such, he reads, “the children of Israel went up *chamushim* from the land of Egypt,” as referring to the existential and spiritual transformation that took place when our forebears left the 50 Gates of *Tumah* behind and embraced *binah*, the 50th gate of *kedushah* and *chasidut*. At long last, we were on our way to the ultimate freedom we would experience upon receiving the Torah on Mount Sinai—50 days later.

With Hashem's help and our fervent desire, may we also guide ourselves by the pure light of *binah*, *kedushah* and *chasidut* that are the hallmarks of our holy Torah. *V'chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* on the topics of *Tefilah* and *Tanach* may be found at: <http://tinyurl.com/8hsdpyd>

*** I have posted 164 of Rabbi Soloveitchik's English language audio *shiurim* (MP3 format) spanning the years 1958-1984. Please click on the highlighted link: [The Rav zatzal](#)