

Parashat Bo 5775, 2015:

Slavery: The Laboratory of Compassion

Rabbi David Etengoff

Dedicated to the sacred memories of my mother, Miriam Tovah bat Aharon Hakohen, father-in-law, Levi ben Yitzhak, sister-in-law, Ruchama Rivka Sondra bat Yechiel, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Shmuel David ben Moshe Halevy, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, the *refuah shlaimah* of Yosef Shmuel ben Miriam, Devorah bat Chana, and Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel.

It came to pass at the end of four hundred and thirty years, and it came to pass in that very day, that all the legions of the L-rd went out of the land of Egypt... It came to pass on that very day, that the L-rd took the children of Israel out of the land of Egypt with their legions. (*Sefer Shemot, Parashat Bo*, 12:41 and 51, this and all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

Our Torah portion contains the description of *Yetziat Mitzraim* (the Exodus). The two preceding parshiot (*Shemot* and *Va'era*), provide us with frightening snapshots of the relentless suffering our ancestors endured during the merciless years of Egyptian bondage:

So the Egyptians enslaved the children of Israel with backbreaking labor. And they embittered their lives with hard labor, with clay and with bricks and with all kinds of labor in the fields, all their work that they worked with them with backbreaking labor. (*Sefer Shemot* 1:13-14)

In light of the millennia that separate us from the horrors of this enslavement, we might well ask, “How can we understand the Torah’s description of the terror of Egypt so that it speaks to us today?” I believe *Sefer Devarim* 4:20 provides us with an answer when it describes the Egyptian experience as being similar in kind to that of an “iron crucible,” “But the L-rd took you and brought you out of the iron crucible, out of Egypt, to be a people of His possession, as of this day.” *Midrash Shocher Tov* explicates the iron crucible motif in the following manner:

Rabbi Ibo said in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra: “Just like this gold smelter puts forth his hand and removes the gold from the iron crucible, so, too, did the Holy One Blessed Be He act toward the Jewish people when He took them out of Egypt.” (107:4, page 462, Buber edition)

In other words, the *Midrash* is teaching us that the Jewish people were the “gold” in the dross of Egyptian society – a culture that exemplified unfettered violence and uncontrolled pleasure seeking. As such, like gold from a crucible, we needed to be removed from this toxic environment by G-d’s *yad chazakah* (powerful arm). Moreover, for reasons that we may never fully comprehend, it appears that it was an essential part of Hashem’s plan for our ancestors to be exposed to the perverted and pernicious culture of Egypt, and to suffer immeasurably therein. The question, of course, is “Why?”

My rebbe and mentor, Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik *zatzal* (1903-1993), known as “the Rav” by his students and followers, stated that, “The Exodus from Egypt is one of the most significant episodes in Jewish history. Many areas of the Torah are intimately connected with it.” (Rabbi Avishai C. David, *Darosh Darash Yosef: Discourses of Rav Yosef Dov Halevi Soloveitchik on the Weekly Parashah*, page 134) The Rav noted that there are four areas of the Torah that relate directly to *Yetziat Mitzraim* and all that it entailed:

- 1) Laws Pertaining to Holiness
- 2) Laws Pertaining to Social Justice
- 3) The Sabbath
- 4) Commandments that Commemorate the Exodus

(This listing, and the following exposition, are based upon *Darosh Darash Yosef*, pages 134-138)

I would like to focus upon the Laws Pertaining to Social Justice, since they are universally recognized as one of Judaism's singular contributions to the world. The Rav quoted the following verses that command us to remember our experience in Egypt, and, in turn, mandate us to "institute a legal system that addresses the needs of the less fortunate":

You shall not pervert the judgment of a stranger or an orphan, and you shall not take a widow's garment as security [for a loan]. You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt, and the L-rd, your G-d, redeemed you from there; therefore, I command you to do this thing. (*Sefer Devarim* 24:17-18)

We must remember that, for almost all of human history, strangers, widows and orphans were consistently taken advantage of and subject to the worst forms of abuse and oppression. In a world where "might makes right," Judaism's clarion call for authentic justice for all mankind emerged, and emerges, as nothing less than a "light unto nations." (*Sefer Yeshiyahu* 49:6)

While an honest and impartial legal system is crucial to the proper functioning of society, it is, nonetheless, necessary but insufficient without an "ongoing sensitivity to the needy." Here, too, as Rav Soloveitchik observed, Judaism rose to this never-ending challenge and declared "And you shall not mistreat a stranger, nor shall you oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt." (*Sefer Shemot* 22:20)

With the insights garnered from the Rav's judiciously selected quotes and analysis, I believe we are in a position to answer our major question: "Why was it an essential part of Hashem's plan for our ancestors to be exposed to the perverted and pernicious culture of Egypt, and to suffer immeasurably therein?" In my estimation, the nascent Jewish

nation needed to personally experience the trials, tribulations and anguish of Egyptian slavery in order to permanently sensitize our collective psyche to the plight of the downtrodden and those less fortunate – especially the widow, orphan and stranger. In sum, only through the experience of the cauldron of Egyptian misery could the golden compassion of our people be brought forth and become the eternal hallmark of our nation.

With Hashem's help, may the remembrance of our slavery in Egypt enable us to continue to lead the world in *chane v'chesed v'rachamim, m'atah v'od olam* (graciousness, kindness and compassion, now and forever more). *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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*** My audio *shiurim* for Women on “*Tefilah: Haskafah and Analysis*,” 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. They are available here: <http://tinyurl.com/82pgvfn>.

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