

Parashat Bo 5778, 2018:

Why Were We Redeemed?

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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 Yecheil, sister, Shulamit bat Menachem, Chaim Mordechai Hakohen ben Natan Yitzchak, Yehonatan Binyamin ben Mordechai Meir Halevi, Avraham Yechezkel ben Yaakov Halevy, Shayna Yehudit bat Avraham Manes and Rivka, the *refuah shlaimah* of Devorah bat Chana, Yitzhak Akiva ben Malka and Shoshana Elka bat Etel Dina, and the safety of our brothers and sisters in Israel and around the world.

Our *parasha* tells the story of the Jewish people's departure from Egypt:

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. (*Sefer Shemot* 12:41)

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* 12:51, all Bible translations, *The Judaica Press Complete Tanach*)

On a certain level, *Chazal* (Our Sages of blessed memory) were troubled by our people's redemption from Egypt. After all, we had sunk to the 49th level of impurity (*Zohar Chadash*, Parashat Yitro) to the extent that the *malachai hasharet* (Ministering Angels) declared shortly thereafter at the Sea of Reeds: "These [the Egyptians] and these [the Jews] are idol worshippers, why, then, are you saving the Jewish people and drowning the Egyptians in the Sea [of Reeds], for in truth, there is no difference between them?!" (*Midrash Tehillim* 1:20, 15:5, *Zohar*, Parashat Terumah 170, translation my own)

Two major midrashic sources answer this formidable question by noting that we were worthy of the Exodus, and, by extension, the miracle of *kriat yam suf* (Splitting of the Sea of Reeds), based upon four crucial criteria. During the long dark night of Egyptian slavery, we never changed our names from their original Hebrew formulation, we steadfastly continued to speak the Hebrew language, we remained pure and rejected the promiscuous behaviors of Egyptian culture, and finally, we did not speak *lashon harah* (in negative terms) of one another. (*Mechilta d'Rabbi*

Yishmael, Parashat Bo, *Mesichta d' Pischa*, Parasha 5, *Midrash Vayikra Rabbah* 32:5) The first three criteria focus upon the continuity of our ethnic identity; thus, even though we engaged in the severe sin of idol worship, we steadfastly refused to assimilate, and rejected nearly all undesirable aspects of Egyptian culture. Given the powerful draw of our overlords' society, this was laudatory indeed.

Lashon harah appears to be the outlier on this list, since it seems to refer solely to our behavior, rather than to the essence of our national being. Why, then, did our Sages view it as a constitutive element in Hashem's decision to redeem us from Egypt? In order to understand *lashon harah's* singular import in this context, let us briefly review *Chazal's* attitude concerning this serious transgression. We are fortunate that *Talmud Bavli*, *Arakin* 15b serves as a mini-encyclopedia of our Sages' attitude on this subject: "Rabbi Yochanan said in the name of Rabbi Yossi ben Zimra: 'Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is as if he has totally rejected G-d Himself (*kafar b'ikar*).' Rav Chisda said in the name of Mar Ukba that: 'Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is fitting to be put to death by stoning.'" A second statement by Rav Chisda in the name of Mar Ukba is even more powerful: "[Regarding] anyone who speaks *lashon harah*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* (the Holy One Blessed Be He) Himself declares: 'He and I are unable to dwell in the same world!'"

It is important to recognize that these statements are far more than sermon musings meant to dissuade us from speaking *lashon harah*. Instead, they have deep and abiding halachic ramifications. For example, the Rambam (Maimonides, 1135-1204) states:

Our Sages said: "There are three sins for which retribution is exacted from a person in this world and, [for which] he is [additionally,] denied a portion in the world to come: idol worship, forbidden sexual relations, and murder. *Lashon harah* is equivalent to all of them."

Our Sages also said: "Anyone who speaks *lashon harah* is like one who denies Hashem (*kafar b'ikar*) as implied by *Sefer Tehillim* 12:5: "Those who said: With our tongues, we will prevail; our lips are our own. Who is L-rd over us?"

In addition, they said: “*Lashon harah* kills three [people], the one who speaks it, the one who listens to it, and the one about whom it is spoken. The one who listens to it [suffers] more than the one who speaks it.” (*Mishneh Torah, Hilchot De’ot 7:3*, translation, Rabbi Eliyahu Touger, emendations my own)

I believe we can now better understand why *Chazal* included *lashon harah* as one of the four essential elements leading up to the Exodus by closely examining Rav Chisda’s second statement: “Anyone who speaks *lashon harah*, *Hakadosh Baruch Hu* Himself declares, ‘He and I are unable to dwell in the same world!’” The Maharal (Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, 1512-1609) notes that this phrase is also used in connection with the negative personality trait of *ga’avah* (arrogance):

And it appears that these two formulations [connecting *ga’avah* and *lashon harah* with our phrase] are in accordance with the dispute that is found in *Talmud Bavli, Avodah Zarah*, as to whether *chasidut* (righteousness) is greater or *anavah* (humility) is greater regarding their overarching effect on the world. [In reality,] each of these *middot* (ethical characteristics) is the polar opposite of its negative counterpart. This means that the quality of *ga’avah* is the opposite of *anavah*, and *lashon harah* which is evil... to the extent that there is nothing called evil like *lashon harah* – is the exact opposite of the *middah* of *chasidut* that is most surely good for everyone. (*Netivot Olam, Netiv HaAnavah III*, s.v. *v’od sham*, translation and brackets my own)

At this juncture, the Maharal provides us with a clear summary of his thinking regarding the nexus that obtains between *anavah* and *ga’avah*, and *chasidut* and *lashon harah*:

And the author of the opinion that maintains that *anavah* is the most outstanding of all characteristics asserts that its opposite is *ga’avah* - the most offensive of all behavioral orientations. In contrast, the author of the opinion that asserts that *chasidut* is the ultimate positive personality trait affirms that its opposite is *lashon harah*... (Ibid.)

The Maharal’s cogent analysis reveals to us why *Chazal* viewed our ancestors’ refusal to speak *lashon harah* as having such remarkable significance. In short, although we were *ovdei avodah zarah* (idol worshippers), we nonetheless treated one another with *chasidut*, and thereby created an environment wherein, He [i.e. the Jewish people] and I [Hashem] are able to dwell in the same world! Therefore, the Holy One blessed be He redeemed us from Egyptian bondage, split the Sea

of Reeds, gave us His holy Torah and the Land of Israel, and declared through His prophet, Hosea: “And I will betroth you to Me forever, and I will betroth you to Me with righteousness and with justice and with loving-kindness and with mercy. And I will betroth you to Me with faith, and you shall know the L-rd.” (*Sefer Hoshea* 2:21-22)

May Hosea’s words ring loud and clear in the ears of our entire nation as we stand shoulder to shoulder in *chasidut*, so that we may bring Hashem’s holy presence into our midst and be *zocheh* (merit) to welcome the *Mashiach* (Messiah) soon and in our days. *V’chane yihi ratzon*.

Shabbat Shalom

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