

Parashat Vaera 5775, 2015:

Hashem – the Redeemer of the Jewish People

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.

Therefore, say to the children of Israel, “I am the L-rd, and I will take you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will save you from their labor, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. And I will take you to Me as a people, and I will be a G-d to you, and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.” (*Sefer Shemot* 6:6-7, this and all Tanach translations, *The Judaica press Complete Tanach*)

Our *pasukim* (verses) are quite well known, since they form the basis of the universal practice of drinking the four cups of wine at the Passover Seder. The final phrase, “and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,” however, presents significant interpretative difficulties. Based upon many of the antecedent verses of *Sefer Shemot*, it is quite clear that it would be Hashem and no other who would redeem us from the Egyptian servitude to which we had been subjected for 210 years. If that is the case, what is the Torah adding by the inclusion of these words?

Talmud Bavli, Berachot 38a directly addresses our question in the context of its analysis of the term “*hamotzi*” (the One who brings out), as found in the blessing that we recite prior to eating bread:

Regarding what do they [the Sages and Rabbi Nechemyah] disagree? Regarding “*hamotzi*.” The Rabbis hold that “*hamotzi*,” too, connotes that He [G-d] has brought forth, i.e. the term is used on the basis of what G-d *has* done, for it is written: “the One Who brings forth for you water from the rock of flint” [*Sefer Devarim* 8:15]. But R’ Nechemyah holds that “*hamotzi*” connotes that He brings forth [is to understood in the future sense] as it is stated: “I am Hashem your G-d, the One Who brings you forth from under the burden of Egypt [*Sefer Shemot* 6:7, translator’s note: “the redemption was *yet* to be”]. And how do the Rabbis, who held that *hamotzi* connotes what has been done in the past, explain the verse cited by R’ Nechemyah? In that verse this is what the Holy One, Blessed is He, is saying to the Israelites: When I eventually take you out of Egypt, I will perform for you miraculous things, so that you will know that I am the One Who took you out of Egypt, as it is written: “and you will know that I am Hashem, your G-d, the One Who brings you forth ...” (Translation, *The Artscroll Gemara*, Tractate Berachot, pages 38-3 – 38-4, brackets and underlining my own)

Rabbi Baruch Halevi Epstein (1860-1941), in his commentary on the Torah and cognate Rabbinic literature, “*Torah Temimah*,” interprets the end of our passage as suggesting, “that then [after the overwhelming wonders and miracles] you will know, that I [Hashem] was the One that took you out of Egypt.” (Translation and brackets my own) Therefore, the concluding words of our original verses, “and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,” are to be understood as an essential statement of the idea that it was Hashem, and no one else, who redeemed us from the shackles of Egyptian bondage. This theme is noted, as well, in a famous phrase found in the Haggadah of Pesach: “And Hashem took us out of Egypt” (*Sefer Devarim* 26:8) – “Not through the agency of an angel, and not through the agency of a *Saraf*, and not via a messenger, rather, it was the Holy One blessed be He – solely and in all His glory, that took us out of Egypt.”

The great Chasidic master, Rabbi Yehudah Aryeh Leib Alter *zatzal* (1847–1905), known as the “Sefat Emet” after the title of his most renowned work, explains our text, “and you will know that I am the L-rd your G-d, Who has brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians,” in the following manner:

We can readily see that the entire desire of Hashem regarding the Exodus from Egypt was to enable us to know that it was the Holy One blessed be He [and no other] that took us out from there. Therefore, it is necessary to constantly remember the Exodus from Egypt.

Given this analysis, it appears that the Sefat Emet closely follows the above-cited statement of the Haggadah that focuses upon the unilateral role of Hashem in taking us out of Egypt. Yet, he adds an additional center of focus when he states, “Therefore, it is necessary to constantly remember the Exodus from Egypt.” What, we may ask, does this phrase add to our understanding?

The Sefat Emet answers our question with a deep psychological insight that expands the essence and meaning of *Yetziat Mitzraim* (the Departure from Egypt), and places it in a trans-historical context. In his view, every Jewish individual existentially relives the Egyptian experience during each moment of his or her life. As such, he opines, “it is necessary to mention and remember *Yetziat Mitzraim* each and every day of our lives.” He further suggests that an active knowledge and understanding that Hashem emancipated us from the shackles of Egyptian servitude serves as a protective device that obviates the need to suffer in a similar fashion to our forebears in Egypt. An individual, however, who forgets the concept that it was Hashem and no other who performed the wonders and miracles that accompanied the Exodus, and consequently acts with hubris and arrogance, must re-experience the trials and tribulations of Egyptian enslavement. As the Sefat Emet so clearly notes, the attitude of “My strength and the might of my hand has accumulated this wealth for me” (*Sefer Devarim* 8:17) is antithetical to a recognition of G-d’s presence in our lives – and His role as the Redeemer (*Hamotzi*).

With G-d's help, may we acknowledge Him as the sole Redeemer of the Jewish people, both on the national and individual levels. With this recognition, may we grow ever closer to Him in Torah and mitzvot, and personally experience *Yetziat Mitzraim* in our daily lives. *V'chane yihi ratzon.*

Shabbat Shalom

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