

## *Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality*

From **Rav Binny Freedman**

(Portion of Beshalach)

*One of the saddest stories I ever heard was from a Holocaust survivor many years ago who would say Kaddish on the tenth of Tevet every year, in the shul I grew up in as a boy. He was given the privilege of leading the services on that day and for a long time I thought he just had a Yahrtzeit (the anniversary of the death of a loved one...) on the tenth of Tevet. Until one year when I found out he said Kaddish for his whole family on this day because he never found out the exact day of their deaths; the tenth of Tevet is the day chosen to remember those whose exact date of death is not known.*

*One year he spoke on Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) in the Synagogue's Hebrew School, and I went to hear him speak. It transpired that he had escaped the Warsaw ghetto by hiding under a pile of dirty uniforms being taken for cleaning and he had begged his parents and two siblings to come with him, but they had refused to join him.*

*This was before the infamous ghetto wall had been constructed and the Germans had promised things would get better. His parents were Volksdeutsch (native Germans) who hailed originally from Germany before they had been deported to Poland. For a period, these Jews were treated better than Polish Jews as they knew German and carried themselves as Germans. His parents believed the Germans when they said things would get better and tried to convince their son it was too dangerous to leave.*

*After years of German propaganda, they simply could not imagine where things were headed, so they refused to leave, essentially dooming themselves and his siblings to their tragic end. Ultimately, he was the only survivor; the rest of his family was murdered in Treblinka; they simply could not bring themselves to leave when there was still time...*

This week's portion, *Beshalach*, contains a fascinating insight into the challenges that lie behind this seemingly endless question.

This week at long last, the Jewish people are finally free, having left Egypt at the behest of no less than Pharaoh himself, who at the end of last week's portion (*Bo*) cannot even wait until morning to be rid of them, calling Moses and Aaron in the middle of the night (Shemot 12:31) to send the Jewish people on their way. It seems as if the future is bright and sunny and the Jewish people are headed for destiny, when suddenly, everything changes and in an instant, the Jewish people find themselves caught with the Sea before them and the entire Egyptian army bearing down behind them. It seems as if the dream is about to end before it ever really had a chance to get started.

What caused Pharaoh to change his mind so suddenly? The Torah tells us:

*“And it was told to the King of Egypt that the people had escaped, and Pharaoh's heart and the hearts of his servants were turned (changed), and they said: ‘what we have done, that we have sent Israel away from serving us?’” (Shemot (Exodus) 14:5)*

What does this mean that Pharaoh is told the people have escaped? Didn't he just send them away in the midst of the tenth plague?

Indeed, Pharaoh himself summons Moshe and Aaron in the middle of the night saying:

*"... Get ye' up and get out from amongst my people, you and the children of Israel a well, and go and worship G-d as you have said."* (Shemot 12:31)

Why is Pharaoh concerned with what the Jewish people will do when they leave Egypt? Isn't it enough to say, 'get out of Egypt'?

Apparently, Pharaoh was sending the Jewish people out of Egypt to worship G-d, and one wonders whether he has any idea the Jews are leaving for good. Perhaps he thinks it is the ancient version of Woodstock; they need to party and serve their god, but they'll be back, right?

Could Pharaoh have been so naïve as to believe that once released from bondage, the Jews would be coming back? In truth, this was not an innocent assumption; this seems to be exactly what Moshe wanted Pharaoh to think!

When Moshe and Aaron first meet Pharaoh, their initial request is:

*"... So said Hashem, the G-d of Israel: Send out my people that they may celebrate (to) me in the desert."* (Shemot 5:1)

In other words, Moshe and Aaron do not ask Pharaoh to let the Jewish people go free, all he seems to want is a three-day furlough in the desert!

And it's no wonder Pharaoh does not take Moshe, (and for that matter, G-d,) seriously, when all he is asking for is a three-day weekend! Pharaoh might well be thinking that if G-d were so powerful, he would be talking about freedom, not a few days off.

And, lest we think this was just a tactic dreamed up by Moshe, a careful look at the beginning of Moshe's entire mission at the burning bush is revealing:

*"And now go, and I will send you to Pharaoh that you may take my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt."* (Shemot (Exodus) 3:10)

To which Moshe responds:

*"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and that I should take the children of Israel out of Egypt?"* (3:11)

To which G-d responds:

*"For I will be with you, and this shall be for you the sign that I have sent you: when you will take the nation out of Egypt, you shall serve G-d (The G-d) on this mountain."* (3:12)

The point of this entire exercise seems to be for the Jewish people to get out of Egypt so they can worship G-d on 'this mountain', which according to Jewish tradition, as Rashi points out here, is in fact Mount Sinai.

Indeed, G-d, when describing to Moshe what he will say when first meeting Pharaoh actually says:

*"And you shall come, you and the elders of Israel to the king of Egypt and say to him: G-d, the Lord of the Hebrews appeared to us and now please let us go on a three-day journey into the desert that we may offer up to Hashem our G-d."* (3:18)

What is this request for a three-day jaunt into the desert? Why isn't the plan to just ask Pharaoh to 'let my people go'? Why is there a need for this deception? Clearly, the plan is for the Jewish people to leave Egypt behind them for a lot more than three days, as G-d tells Moshe is meant to tell the elders of Israel:

*"I will bring you up from the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites... to the land flowing with milk and honey."* (3:17)

So what's the game? Why is Moshe trying to trick Pharaoh into letting them go by telling him they are only taking a three-day vacation?

Indeed, a careful look reveals that throughout the ten plagues G-d visits on Egypt, Moshe consistently asks Pharaoh, in G-d's name to: *"send my people that they may worship me in the desert...."* (7:16,26 etc.)

The Ramban suggests a fascinating possibility:

According to the Torah there were 600,000 *men* between the ages of twenty and sixty (military service age) leaving Egypt, which, when adding the old and young, men women and children, would mean the Jewish people actually numbered in the *millions*.

Consider the implications, then, of walking out of Egypt into the desert with millions of people: who would feed them? Where would they find water? And of course, where were they going? Israel (nee' Canaan) was occupied at the time by seven fierce and war-like tribes including the Philistines and the Amalekites; how would an un-armed (from Pharaoh's perspective) and untrained mass of rabble hope to conquer this land from its inhabitants?

Who would take such a plan as 'Let my people go' seriously?

So it would be understandable to use the ruse of a three-day party in the desert in order to get the Jews out of Egypt.

What place has this entire masquerade in the Torah?

In truth, the question was never whether G-d could take the Jewish people out of Egypt; the question is when the Jewish people will be ready to leave. And so the first mission really is to get the Jewish people

out of Egypt to Mount Sinai, because only when the people stand before G-d, away from the pagan and evil world that is Egypt, will they be capable of letting go of the hold Egypt has on their minds and hearts.

Physically, G-d could certainly have moved the Jewish people out of Egypt, but if the Jews don't really want to go, then what's the point?

And this was precisely the issue at the core of Moshe's mission three thousand years ago. After two hundred plus years in Egypt, having suffered the pain and agony of persecution at the hands of a bestial society which at the time set the standard for evil and cruelty in the world, the time has finally come to set the Jewish people free, but if Hashem forces them to leave then they may be physically leaving, but emotionally and psychologically they will remain in Egypt.

All of which is why the mission of leaving Egypt is *all* about arriving at Sinai: because only at Sinai, in the desert, away from the paganism and wickedness of Egypt, can the Jews discover who they are meant to be. And that is also why it is so important for them to accept the Torah, as illustrated by the words they speak as one at the foot of Sinai (Shemot 24): "*Na'aseh Ve'Nishma*"; "*We will do, and will hear*", which means they chose to accept their mission as a people.

But in order for the Jewish people to be ready to receive Hashem in their lives they first need to let go of Egypt. As long as they were in Egypt, two hundred years of slavery meant their minds were still enslaved; as much as G-d is setting them free they need to see Pharaoh let them go. And only when they subsequently see Pharaoh and his army destroyed, something they might not have been able to see in Egypt, can they then journey to Sinai and receive the Torah.

Sometimes before we can move forward, we first have to let go of what has been holding us back all along.... The Talmud (Tractate Rosh Hashanah 10b) suggests that changing one's environment can change everything. If a person wants to lose weight, he has to walk out of the bakery before he can get to the gym. And perhaps as a people, to move forward, we have to leave the exile behind so that we can see where it is we could be headed ....

Shabbat Shalom,  
Binny Freedman