

Small Tastings of Torah, Judaism and Spirituality From Rav Binny Freedman

(Portion of Shemot)

In the year 1263 Raymond de Penyafort of Spain challenged the Jewish people to a debate.

As the church's representative, he chose a Dominican friar named Pablo Christiani, a Sephardic Jew who had converted to Christianity, to represent them.

The Jewish community came to no less than the Ramban himself, to represent them. The Ramban, Rav Moshe ben Nachman (Nachmanides) was the undisputed great leader of his generation. (His now famous commentaries on the entire Torah and Talmud established him as one of the greatest scholars in Jewish history.) He agreed on condition that he be allowed to respond in the debate. The church was relying on the fact that the Jews would be hesitant to incur the wrath of the church by responding to Christiani's suppositions, but King James of Aragon, in whose presence the debate took place granted the Ramban free speech.

After the debate the Church published its version of the debate which suggested the Jews had no answers for Christiani's contentions. So, the Ramban published his own version demonstrating the fallacy of the Church's position. For this act (the Church at the time controlled the printing presses; publishing anything against the Church's wishes was a crime punishable by death) the Church wanted to sentence the Ramban to death. However, King James of Aragon commuted the sentence instead to exile. Thus, the Ramban was forced to leave Spain forever.

So where does a Jew who is exiled go? The Ramban made his way to Israel eventually coming to Jerusalem in 1267 where he lived out the last years of his life.

In fact, the Jewish community of Jerusalem at the time was so small, legend has it that the Ramban actually arrived as the tenth man for the *minyan* (quorum) for afternoon prayers (*Mincha*) that afternoon.

So, if you were to ask a Spanish Christian in 1267, he would have told you the Ramban was living in exile, in Jerusalem. Yet the Ramban's writings clearly suggest he believed he had at last, come home. He had actually *left* the exile in Spain! So where is exile and where or what is 'home'?

This week we begin the story of the Jewish people. The family of Yaakov journeys from the land of Israel to ancient Egypt, and under the protection of Joseph, now the Viceroy of Egypt, makes their home there to escape the famine that is ravaging the Middle East.

So... are they now in exile? Interestingly, Joseph settles his family in the land of Goshen, and gives it to them as a possession (an "*achuzah*" see *Bereishit* (Genesis) 47:11), but the brothers describe it more as a place they have come to *dwell* in (ibid 47:4: "*La'gur* ba'aretz banu...") but not necessarily to settle in. (As opposed to Yaakov settling the land of Israel (ibid. 37:1).

Indeed, the word *lagur*, related to the word '*ger*', a stranger, reminds us of the prophecy given earlier to Avraham:

"ki *ger* yehiyeh zaracha be'erezt lo' lahem ..."

"Your offspring one day will be *strangers* in a land that is not for them..." (ibid 15:13)

Indeed, G-d promises that Avraham's offspring, the Jewish people, will be enslaved in that 'land that is not theirs' but will one day return to the land that Hashem has given us (ibid. v. 18).

So Egypt is not meant to be our home and we will ultimately be enslaved and suffer there before we finally leave in a great Exodus and come back home to Israel where it seems we belong.

Yet, fascinatingly, Yaakov and his children go down to join Joseph in Egypt and seem to settle quite comfortably in the land of Goshen which they are given to 'possess'. Don't they remember the promise G-d made to Avraham that the good times will not last?

Rav Adin Steinsaltz in his *Chayei Olam* suggests that there are really two realities: **chutz la'aretz**, which is a geographic term referring to any place that is outside of Israel, and **galut** or exile which seems to occur when we are actually oppressed. Yaakov and his sons do not feel they are in **galut**, because they are allowed to feel they are quite at home; they (think they) possess their own land (Goshen), are allowed to pursue their own occupation as shepherds (conveniently forgetting or ignoring the fact that the Egyptians (ibid. 46:34) abhor shepherds...) and live apart from the host Egyptians in their own (mini-Israel) land of Goshen.

True **galut** (exile) it seems, begins when we begin to feel oppressed, but it is a gradual process, and by the time the Jews realize how much trouble they are in it's too late. Indeed, the Torah tells us that Pharaoh eventually subjugates the Jews '*be'pharech*' (Exodus 1:13) which Rashi explains to be hard, back breaking labor. But the Midrash in a play on words suggests it also means *be'peh rach* with a soft tongue, i.e. gradually seducing the Jews deeper and deeper until it is too late.

It may even be that the Jews began to feel, given their relationship with no less than the Viceroy of Egypt, at home in Egypt, perhaps enjoying Egyptian culture whilst becoming immersed in Egyptian society, and even contributing to the Egyptian economy and social structure.

Whether they began to feel at home or not, one thing is abundantly clear from the text: they are about to suffer a rude awakening. A new Pharaoh arises in Egypt, who has no love for the Jews nor any recognition of their contribution to Egyptian society, and the comfortable lives of the children of Israel gradually descends into a spiral of agony and horror, until they find themselves at the lowest strata of a slave society where people become numbers and human beings are measured for the value of their work output.

The entire story of the enslavement of the Jewish people and the morass of evil that ensues begins with one very specific occurrence:

"And a new King arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exodus (*Shemot*) 1:8)

How could a King of Egypt have no knowledge of who Joseph was?

How could a Pharaoh living in the time immediately following Joseph's death even be able to pretend he does not know who Joseph was? How could the Egyptian people allow such a convenient 'amnesia' to take place, conveniently forgetting all the good Joseph had done for Egypt in saving it from seven years of famine and ensuring its survival as the Empire of the time?

Make no mistake about it: this is not just an ancient phenomenon; the Holocaust began because an entire society did not feel any sense of gratitude towards a generation of Jews who fought in her defense in World War I....

We see this phenomenon all around us today. There are Jews in various places in the world who are clearly in exile. It is hard to imagine a Jew living in Iran, Syria, or even Venezuela today not recognizing that they are not at home.

Indeed, the Jews of France, given the events of the past ten years, seem to be struggling with exactly this question: Is France still home to the 500,000 Jews who dwell there?

On the one hand tens if not hundreds of thousands of French Jews seem to be exploring an exit strategy, whether that means buying homes in Israel, or investing their savings in more liquid savings and not necessarily in French banks. And yet they are not voting with their feet; they are still in France hoping the winds will blow in a different direction and France can still be home.

On the other hand, in many places in the world, America chief amongst them, the Jewish community feels very much at home. And while some acknowledge that the US is '*chutz la'aretz*', or geographically extant to Israel, they do not feel at all that they are in exile.

One wonders where the winds of change will blow, and what it will take, as has ever been the case in Jewish history, for us to be reminded that the Jewish people only has one home, and it's not Brooklyn.

On a personal level, as Jews, we mention the Exodus from Egypt every day; in fact, multiple times a day: when we say the *Shema*, make *Kiddush* on Shabbat, say Grace after meals (*birkat hamazon*), and so on. Perhaps we risk becoming too comfortable with where we are and are in need of a reminder now and then that a little redemption is a good thing.

We get stuck; distant from the person we thought once we could be; in exile from ourselves. Judaism encourages us to take a journey and exit the things that hold us back; the 'narrow straits of servitude' that Egypt represents.

Perhaps this week's portion affords us all the chance to do some careful reading, and thinking, and maybe even acting and changing....

Shabbat Shalom from Jerusalem,

Binny Freedman