

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Shemot

The first five verses in the Book of Exodus tell us the names of the sons of Jacob who went down with him to Egypt, totalling seventy people, including the grandchildren. The Torah already delineated all of these names, and did so in more detail, when Jacob and his sons actually descended to Egypt (Genesis 46:8). So why does the Torah repeat it here? Rashi (Exodus 1:1) says G-d counts the tribes again before their death in order to show His love for them. But Nachmonides (Introduction to Exodus) claims that the Torah relates this here because the exile of the Jewish people began when Jacob and his sons all went down to Egypt. Since the entire Book of Exodus deals with the first exile (“galut”) and the subsequent redemption from it (“geula”), the Torah chooses to mention the descent to Egypt, although it already told this story several chapters earlier.

Studying the exile in Egypt and the redemption from it can help give us perspective on our present exile. Rashi (Genesis 47:28) indicates the Jews’ hearts and eyes became closed from the pain of the subjugation immediately after Jacob passed away. Now since the Egyptians did not enslave the Jewish people until Joseph died (see 1:6-14), how could Rashi say “the pain of the subjugation” began when Jacob died, which happened 54 years earlier? R’ Eliyahu Mizrachi (15th Century) answers, based on an opinion in the Talmud (Sotah 11b), that the Egyptians started asking the Jews to work for them and even paid them to do so, in order to get them accustomed to a slave mentality (Rashi *ibid.*). They only coerced them to work for them and embittered their lives years later. When Jacob passed away, the Egyptians started using the Jews and even Joseph could not stop this. This pained the Jews because they could see the words G-d told Abraham, that his descendents would become slaves in a foreign land, beginning to come to fruition. So the first experience of “subjugation” was not physical in nature. The oppressive feeling from being manipulated to serve in a foreign land, albeit in a pleasant way, weighed on them and caused them to close their eyes and hearts.

Rashi’s line: “their eyes and hearts were closed” implies they felt stuck, like a person trapped in a narrow place who cannot even dream of getting out. But Moses, the man chosen by G-d to redeem the Jewish people from slavery, understands the plight of the Jewish people and feels their suffering. Rashi comments, (2:11) “He gave his eyes and heart to be pained for them,” implying Moses’s uniqueness lay in his ability to empathize with his brethren. A person living with a slave mentality may lack the expanded consciousness needed to be able to empathize with another person. His own challenges may consume him and make it hard for him to break out of his own suffering, so he may lack the emotional strength needed to absorb someone else’s troubles. The Midrash on the words “vayigdal Moshe” (2:11) says Moses’s sensitivity was the sign of his greatness, and therefore



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the verse repeats “he became big” (“vayigdal”) after mentioning it already in 2:10. While the first “vayigdal” refers to his physical maturation, the second one refers to his great sensitivity, which distinguished him from the masses and made him the worthy person to lead the Jewish people out of exile.

Moses was so sensitive to the pain of others that he was deeply distraught to hear a Jew speaking negatively about a fellow Jew. Rashi (2:14) says that when Moshe heard one Jew spreading a bad tale about another Jew, he understood why the Jewish people deserved to be enslaved. So it is a vicious cycle, as insensitivity to other people can be not just a result of being exiled, but can even be the root cause for the exile.

Similarly, the Chofetz Chaim (20th Century Poland) comments that the Second Temple was destroyed due to baseless hatred (intro. to Guarding One’s Tongue). He explains one of the expressions of baseless hatred is when one feels the need to speak badly about another person. He says that in order to merit the building of the Third Temple, we need to try to stop speaking badly about others and instead generate unconditional love for them. Although in our current exile we do not need to work as slaves for a Pharaoh, we share the trapped, narrow mentality of a slave whenever we cannot expand our consciousness to love another person. Just like Moses’s expanded consciousness made him worthy of being the leader for redemption, we can merit redemption from our current exile by opening our minds and hearts to the needs of others.

The first blessing of the Shemoneh Esrei ends with the line “And He brings a Redeemer for their sons’ sons, with love.” Why does it say the Redeemer will come specifically with love? The antidote to the baseless hatred that caused the destruction of the Second Temple is unconditional love. May we rise above the sense of pettiness caused by our long exile and expand our eyes and hearts to care more about the needs of others.

Shabbat Shalom

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