

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Va'eira

One of the great things about learning the stories of the Torah as a child is that things are very straightforward. The good guys are good, the bad guys are bad, and the storyline is easy to follow. The beginning of this week's Torah reading is a great example.

At the end of last week's Torah reading, Moshe's first mission to Pharaoh failed miserably, even leading to a harshening of the servitude. Moshe then questioned G-d's willingness to free the Jews, even going so far as to ask G-d, "Why did You send me?" In response, our Torah portion begins with G-d's assurance to Moshe that the Jews will be redeemed. G-d expresses this redemption four times, what is commonly known as the four phrases of redemption, and in thanks to G-d for the fulfillment of the four promises of redemption, we imbibe four cups of wine on Seder night.

However, if we reexamine the story as adults we find it shockingly incomprehensible. After all, why does G-d need to promise Moshe four times, wouldn't one have been enough? In fact, even a superficial reading of the text makes clear that G-d did not repeat the promise, "I will save you," four times, rather he offered four distinct promises of redemption:

"(1) And I will remove you from beneath the burdens of Egypt, (2) and I will save you from their slavery, (3) and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments. (4) And I will take you as a nation to Me, and I will be a G-d to you"(Exodus 6:6-7).

Even so, we are still left with a question: why were four separate promises of redemption necessary?

Rabbi Ovadiah Sforno (circa 1470-1550) offers an insightful approach. He points out that the redemption actually happened in four stages, and each promise of redemption corresponds to one stage in the process. "And I will remove you from beneath the burdens of Egypt" refers to the cessation of the actual work in Egypt, which the Midrash states happened when the plagues began. "And I will save you from their slavery" refers to the actual Exodus (as long as the Jews were in Egypt they were slaves, whether they were working or not). "And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great judgments" refers to the splitting of the sea, the point when the redemption itself was complete. Finally, "And I will take you as a nation to Me, and I will be a G-d to you" refers to the giving of the Torah on Mount Sinai. Thus we have four separate promises for four separate stages of the redemption.

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Sforno's comment is very instructive. The splitting of the sea is clearly related to the Exodus- after all, could the Jews truly be considered free with the Egyptians on their tails, trying to return them to slavery. This is even reflected in the holiday of Passover. Passover begins on the anniversary of the Exodus, and ends on the anniversary of the splitting of the sea. However, viewing the giving of the Torah as a fulfillment of the fourth promise of redemption is a novel approach with far reaching significance.

The significance is twofold. Firstly, by describing the giving of the Torah as G-d taking us as a nation and being a G-d for us, we are taught that the essence of the giving of the Torah is the formation of the relationship between G-d and the Jews. Interestingly, the verb used in the fourth phrase of redemption is the same verb used to describe marriage- the giving of the Torah created a covenant between G-d and the Jews similar to that of marriage.

Secondly, by presenting this as a stage in the redemption process, the Torah is providing us with new insight into the concept of redemption. Our general understanding of redemption is the absence of slavery or domination by another. From that perspective the giving of the Torah does not seem to be part of the redemption process at all- in fact, a cynic might argue that they are going deeper into slavery. However, a deeper perspective on redemption is that freedom is not best defined as a negative there needs to be a positive vision and goal behind it. It is not enough to focus on freedom *from*, we must focus on the freedom *to*. What are we going to do with our freedom? What is the point of it all? These are the questions we must answer in order for our freedom to be true freedom, and not just the absence of slavery. And these are the questions that the fourth phrase of redemption is coming to address. We are not trying to leave Egypt because it is not an enjoyable existence; our focus is not on *not* being here. Rather, we need our freedom *in order to* forge a relationship with G-d, and we will dedicate our whole existence as a nation towards fostering the connection with G-d on a global scale. *"And I will take you as a nation for Me, and I will be for you a G-d!"*

We have four cups of wine commemorating four phrases of redemption, declaring to ourselves and the world that our freedom is only complete when we have entered into a covenant with G-d, a freedom to have a mission in this world and the ability to actualize it. I guess Torah, like wine, gets better with age.

Shabbat Shalom!

