

JEWISH STUDY NETWORK

Vaera

“But when Moshe told this to the Israelites, they would not listen to Moshe, their spirits crushed by cruel bondage.” (Exodus 6:9)

R. Yaakov Kamenetzky (1891-1986) points out something strange. Until this point, the Jews had been listening to Moshe. While they were indeed suffering terribly in their enslavement, Moshe’s hopeful message had resonated with them:

“And the people were convinced. When they heard that Hashem had taken note of the Israelites and that He had seen their plight, they bowed low in homage.” (ibid. 4:31)

It is true that Pharaoh had increased the suffering of the Jews, insisting that they gather the straw necessary for the production of bricks on their own. Nonetheless, could the Jews not understand that all this was part of Hashem’s process? Knowing that they were in His hands, how could they so quickly lose faith? What occurred to dampen their enthusiasm?

To answer this question, R. Yaakov reminds us that Moshe had negotiated with Pharaoh previously that the Jews should be given a day of rest, which of course was Shabbos. He quotes a Midrash that says that the Jews would gather on Shabbos and forget their misery by reading special megillos, scrolls that contained messages of hope and redemption. R. Yaakov theorizes that these scrolls were the book of Iyov (Job) and certain ancient chapters of Tehillim (Psalms) composed by Moshe himself.

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When Moshe asked Pharaoh to let the Jews leave Egypt, Pharaoh became infuriated and revoked his previous permission. No longer would the Jews be permitted to rest on Shabbos; from this point on, they would have to work gathering straw and making bricks throughout the week. The Jews were left without any time to rest and observe Shabbos. It goes without saying that their customary Shabbos readings fell by the wayside. It is thus, R. Yaakov explains, that the Jews lost their hope and faith in Moshe and his prophecy.

אין ישראל נגאלין אלא בזכות השבת.

Israel is only redeemed in the merit of Shabbos.

Vayikra Rabbah 3:1

Shabbat Shalom
Rabbi Asher Coleman