

DIMENSIONS IN CHUMASH

Pesach

Seder Night: Rosh Hashanah of the Jewish Heart

Most of us are more or less familiar with what happens on Seder Night in terms of what we do. What we might not focus on is what happens to us on Seder Night. This second question is most deserving of our contemplation, for whether or not we will be leading the Seder, we should certainly know what to expect to gain from it.

THE EXILE OF SPEECH

Let us begin by referring to a statement of the Arizal, who says that the exile in Egypt was the exile of speech. Needless to say, this statement is somewhat mystifying. What does it mean for speech to be “in exile”? Presumably speech is in exile when the person doing the speaking is himself in exile, which then sounds like another way of describing exile itself!

What is the Arizal teaching us?

The Shem MiShmuel of Socatchov¹ explains. Exile is a state of distance or detachment from one’s proper place or home. Words are “in exile” when they are detached from their “place” – the person who speaks them. We are all familiar with situations where we speak with someone but they seem... distant. In what way are they distant? Are they not sitting right in front of us? Are their words not clearly audible to us? Yes, but the person doing the talking doesn’t seem to be there. Perhaps he is otherwise preoccupied, or perhaps he himself is not interested in what he is saying.

Words are “at home” when they express the thoughts and feelings of a person who is present and standing behind them.

WHEN EYES AND HEARTS SHUT DOWN

The “distant” state we have described is essentially the state of the Jewish people while they were in the exile of Egypt. The final parsha of Chumash Bereishis, Parshas Vayechi, is unusual in that it is “sealed”, i.e. it begins without the standard break denoting a new parsha. Rashi comments:²

¹ Introduction to Haggadah.

² Bereishis 47:28.

This parsha is sealed, for when Yaakov died, the eyes and hearts of Israel were sealed and stopped up, due to the distress of the oppression with which they began to be oppressed.

In what way were our eyes and hearts “sealed” and why did this happen? The Shem MiShmuel explains, these faculties were “sealed” in the sense that they became insensitive, and ceased receiving or transmitting emotion. This happened in order to allow the Jewish people to survive the oppression. One cannot remain sensitive when one sensitivities are being brutalized on a daily basis. One cannot afford the luxury of feelings when those feelings are trampled underfoot by oppressors from whom there is no respite. In order to survive, the eyes put up shutters to keep the harsh reality outside, and the heart shuts down and turns to stone.

When people like that speak, what do their words sound like? They sound like the words of people who do not care whether what they are saying is true, even if they actually believe that it is. Words may be spoken, but there is no one behind them to instill them with conviction, vigor or feeling of any kind. Those words are produced in a void, almost as if they said themselves. That is when speech is in exile.

FULL REDEMPTION

When we appreciate the state the Jewish people were in due to their exile, we will come to understand that their redemption from exile would not be complete if they were not emotionally revived and rehabilitated. If they would be released from slavery and taken out of Egypt but would not have their hearts restored to them, not only will they not be totally free, they will be unable to fully function as individuals or as a nation, and certainly not as God’s nation. The goal of leaving Egypt is to embark on the singular journey and assume the unique destiny of the Jewish people. This begins with us receiving the Torah at Sinai, and Torah received with a heart of stone has not been fully received. The mitzvot fulfilled in such an emotional void will be consigned to the same exiled state as the words those people speak. Reclaiming the heart of the Jewish people lies at “the heart” of the redemption itself! Words need to be spoken with their owners present, and thus speech will be redeemed.

THE ROLE OF MIRACLES IN THE EXODUS

This idea gives us an added vista through which to appreciate the miracles which precipitated and accompanied our release from Egypt. Commentators have noted, the ten miraculous plagues were not strictly needed in order to secure our release. That is something which could have very simply been settled with a debilitating migraine for Pharaoh until the Jewish people are a safe distance from his country. And yet the way in which we left was miraculous in the extreme. What for?

A most profound answer to this question is that the miracles of that final year in Egypt served an integral role in the redemption itself. By ingraining in us over the course of that year the message that we were considered cherished and valuable enough by the Omnipotent Creator of the world to perform such miracles on our behalf, our hearts and eyes slowly emerged from their hibernation and we began to dare to feel again. The result of this year-long revival process was that when the time came for us to leave, as an emotionally engaged entity we were back in play! This is the significance of the verse which describes us as leaving Egypt “b’yad ramah – with an upraised arm,”³ i.e. full of confidence and in high spirits.

3 Shemos 14:8.

THE SONG AT THE SEA

This central theme of emotional redemption should also give us deeper insight into the events of the seventh day of Pesach. The process of the Exodus from Egypt began with the Jewish people leaving on the first day of Pesach and ended with their Egyptian pursuers being drowned in the Red Sea on the seventh day. Upon witnessing the demise of their former oppressors, the Jewish people opened up in song. How would we characterize that song in terms of their redemption?

- In physical or political terms, the song was a *response to the final stage of their redemption – the drowning of the Egyptians.*
- *In emotional terms, the song itself was the final stage of their redemption!*

People who are emotionally shut down do not respond to their freedom – or any other experience – with song. They just trudge along, and it is sometimes hard to tell if they actually realize what has happened to them, much less care about it. That is not a free person. For the Jewish people to burst into song was a climactic expression of their emotional redemption and rehabilitation.

PLACES IN TIME

The formative events in the Jewish people's history leave their imprint on the day in which they occurred. Each year, when that day arrives, we meet the same day in which those events originally occurred. The yearly cycle is such that once a year we return to that "place in time" and are able to partake of the qualities endowed within it by those momentous formative events.

Therefore, on Seder night, through telling and connecting with the story of our Exodus, we "check in" to the place where we first received our heart, in order to receive it again. For indeed, Seder night is the Rosh Hashanah of the Jewish Heart.

This is why so much emphasis is placed on emotional engagement during the Seder.

1. Firstly, we are told to tell the story beginning with the negative experiences and culminating with the positive ones. Why mention the negative at all? Why not just focus on the positive. The answer is, Seder night needs to be engaged with our emotional faculties, not just our cerebral ones. One may be *aware intellectually of being free, but one only appreciates it emotionally when considering its contrast – the fact that we began as slaves.*
2. Additionally, the central mitzvah of the evening, telling the story of the Exodus, can only be properly fulfilled by enlisting the faculty of imagination, for on this a night, "a person must see himself as if he just now came out of Egypt." This notion is understandably a difficult one to absorb, at least initially, for mitzvos and imagination are not normally such good friends! Yet when it comes to this mitzvah, imagination is key, and it is something we are well capable of using. What will I miss if I remember the Exodus as a past event and not one that has just happened to me? The answer is, you will miss the experience. Each year we have a rendezvous in Egypt; we revisit the place where we received our heart and we receive it again.
3. Moreover, this is why children are the focus of the Seder, for children are engaged emotionally, and that is the atmosphere which defines Seder night. Children do not respond to words spoken at them if they sense there is no one there speaking them. This leads us to a remarkable discovery about Seder night, namely, talking to children on this night about the Exodus in a way that they connect with is as important for the adults as it is for the children!

EXODUS THROUGHOUT JEWISH HISTORY

Should we ask: Why do I need to receive a new heart every year? The answer is, for the same reason we received it in the first place. The formative events of our people have become rolled into the Jewish year, because each year they happen again. Each year adds a unique iteration to our history and destiny. The Torah we received on Shavuot all those centuries ago is received every year – for that year, which means that we likewise need to prepare ourselves to receive it every year – for that year. The way we do so is the way we originally did: by leaving Egypt and becoming God’s people.

In fact there is a deeper idea here. R’ Moshe Chaim Luzzato⁴ explains that the rectification of imperfection and triumph of good over evil which occurred when we left Egypt was pivotal and momentous, but it was not complete. This is due to the fact that the exile itself was not completed, for we were unable to remain in exile the entire term, and were thus forced to come out before the ordained four hundred years were up.

How is the process of rectification completed?

The answer to this question should give us a totally new perspective on Seder night: Every year on this night, by re-experiencing the Exodus through telling the story, we bring the process of *yetzias Mitzrayim further towards its completion!*

MITZRAYIM: NATIONAL AND PERSONAL

The idea of re-acquiring a Jewish heart on an annual basis needs further contemplation. After all, in terms of our emotional make-up, it doesn’t sound like our situation is analogous to that of our ancestors in Egypt. They shut down emotionally due to unbearable oppression. Hopefully, we have not been subjected to the same awful conditions that should require such a shutdown. This means we shouldn’t be in need of a new heart on Pesach, as our existing heart is alive and active. In emotional terms, we are good to go! No?

No.

The commentators explain that the term Mitzrayim, in addition to referring to the country that persecuted us as a nation, denotes a concept that can affect us on an individual basis as well. The word Mitzrayim derives from the root meytzar (מצר), which means boundary. The existential state referred to as Mitzrayim is one where a person is dominated by constraints and limitations in terms of what they do or feel. In a sense, servitude can continue in terms of our subjugation to various unhealthy limitations, whether they are imposed societally or internally. Faced with our limitations and shortcomings, from which we see no hope of escape, we may become discouraged from engaging emotionally in Torah and mitzvos. This may even come from a place of honesty: we feel untruthful – or unworthy – engaging emotionally in our Judaism. Moreover, and perhaps resultantly, we allow our vision to be diminished and our emotional attention to be caught and claimed by matters of lesser importance, leaving our Torah actions somewhat detached. We are not as “present” in our speech where it should count, not to Hashem in prayer, and not to our fellow man in meaningful conversation.

In truth, the national and personal meanings of “Mitzrayim” are not two distinct ideas, rather, one is a progression from the other. With the initial rectification at the time of the Exodus incomplete, room is left for unhealthy straits and limitations to hinder and hamper us on an individual level. And so, thousands of years after having left Egypt, “Mitzrayim” remains capable of threatening an emotional shutdown and exiling our words.

4 Maamar Hachochma.

We now appreciate the crucial significance of the opportunity offered to us each year on Seder night. Essentially, we are not that unlike our ancestors on this night. As we leave the “mitzrayim” of the past year behind, we wish to reclaim our Jewish heart, and to have it pulsate in all that we do and say in the year ahead. This means that when comes to matters that are of ultimate significance, we say that in the future, we wish to be present!

This idea is of special significance this year, when we find ourselves unexpectedly constrained in terms of our usual activities and involvements. And yet, in all this, we are presented with the opportunity to re-connect with ideas and pursuits that were perhaps distanced by those very activities with which we were involved. Although we left Mitzrayim at daytime of the fifteenth of Nissan, the initial moment of redemption was the night before, a time when were not allowed to leave our homes, during which we bonded together as families and connected with the Divine Presence

Empowered, inspired, and invigorated by this unique and special evening, we can look forward in the year ahead to bringing our words closer to us, and to taking a decisive step towards leaving Mitzrayim – in all its forms – behind us, for good!

Wishing you all a safe, happy and healthy Pesach