

Parsha Shiur by Rabbi Mayer Friedman

פרשת שמות

ובני ישראל פרו וישרצו וירבו ויעצמו במאד מאד ותמלא הארץ אתם
“The Children of Israel were fruitful, teemed, increased, and became strong - very, very much so; and the land became filled with them” (1:7)

The Netziv writes that "the land became filled with them" because they began to move out of Goshen. They did not listen to Yaakov's instructions to settle only in Goshen and remain separate from the Egyptians. Instead, as their numbers grew, they took up residences in the non-Jewish neighborhoods as well. This was part of a general effort to blend in with the Egyptians around them. Likewise, the midrash says that after Yosef's death, the Jews stopped circumcising their children in an effort to become like the Egyptians. This resulted in the events of the following posuk, the accession of a new king who despised the Jews and issued evil decrees against them. R' Nissan Alpert adds that this was a punishment that corresponded to what they had done wrong. The Jews acted as if they did not know Yosef. They failed to follow Yosef's example to remain separate while living in a foreign society. As a result, there came a new king who did not know Yosef. He may have known Yosef, but like the Jewish people, he chose to overlook who Yosef was and the lessons that should have been learned from his life. In modern times, it is still especially important for us to make sure that we know Yosef. We should feel like strangers when we are in exile and not become too comfortable. The Netziv adds that it is when we try to blend in and begin to forget that we are in exile that our enemies gain power and attempt to annihilate us.

ויפן כה וכה וירא כי אין איש ויך את המצרי ויטמנהו בחול
“He turned this way and that and saw that there was no man, so he struck down the Egyptian and hid him in the sand” (2:12)

The Tzror HaMor (R' Avraham Sebag, mid 1400's-1519, Spain) writes that when Moshe "saw that there was no man," he saw no Egyptian men in the area. However, there were Jews there who witnessed what Moshe did. Moshe had no problem with this because he took for granted that no fellow Jew would turn him in if he was acting for their benefit. To emphasize this point, the Tzror HaMor allegorically interprets the burial "in the sand" to mean that he buried the taskmaster in the presence of the Jewish people who are compared to the sand. This understanding fits well with the midrash which records that Moshe turned to the onlookers and said, "You are compared to sand. Just as sand does not make a sound when it is poured, so too Jews are quiet and do not reveal secrets. Do not reveal what just occurred."

The Chofetz Chaim writes: "One is obligated to keep hidden the secrets that his friend reveals to him in confidence. Even though revealing private information is not necessarily slander, divulging the secret will cause harm to the person who confided in him and undoes his plans. Doing so is also beyond the boundaries of modesty and goes against the wishes of the one who told him the secret (Sefer Chofetz Chaim, Hilchos Isurei Rechilus 8:5)." People mistakenly believe that it is permitted to share private information with their spouse or other close relatives. This is not true. One may not share information told in confidence without express permission.

וישמע אלקים את נאקתם ויזכר אלקים את בריתו את אברהם את יצחק ואת יעקב
“Hashem heard their moaning, and Hashem remembered his covenant with Avraham, with Yitzchak and with Yaakov” (2:24)

The Seforno underscores the direct connection in this posuk between the prayer of the

Jewish people and Hashem's decision that the time for the redemption had arrived. It was the power of prayer that helped the Jews earn their redemption from Egypt. The posuk writes that when the Jews davened, Hashem heard them and then remembered his covenant with their forefathers. It is a direct cause and effect. This correlation is repeated by Hashem in next week's parsha (6:4) as well. If we daven sincerely for our needs, Hashem will listen and will do what is best for us. No sincere tefilla goes unanswered because Hashem is there for us whenever we call out to Him.

ויאמר משה אסרה נא ואראה את המראה הגדל הזה מדוע לא יבער הסנה
“Moshe thought: I will turn aside now and look at this great sight - why will the bush not be burned?” (3:3)

Why does the the Torah record Moshe's question? The Torah could have just said that he saw the burning bush and turned to investigate it. After all, even a child would have been astonished by this sight. The fact that Moshe was struck by it is not a big deal!

In order to answer this question, R' Nissan Alpert quotes R' Elchonon Wasserman, who writes that the foundations of Jewish faith are really obvious to every single person as long as he is in control of his physical desires. The world itself bears witness to the presence of the Creator. However, if a person focuses on indulging his temptations, his logic becomes clouded and the presence of Hashem is not plainly obvious to him anymore. Nobody has a lack of faith because he lacks the intuition to see it. It is because he has inhibited his logic by submitting to his base desires. This is why Chazal tell us that the "straying after the heart" mentioned in the third paragraph of Shema refers to apostasy. Following one's heart's desires is the first step in losing faith. When logic subdues temptation, the mind remains free from external influence so that one can automatically recognize the truth. Thus, the mitzvah to believe in Hashem obligates us to prevent temptation from overpowering our innate logic, thereby allowing us to clearly see the will of Hashem and to follow that path.

R' Alpert writes that it is this very idea that is borne out by Moshe's question. A common misconception is that one must be a philosopher or a deep thinker and spend a great deal of time meditating on the subject in order to understand Hashem and His ways. This is not so. The truth of Hashem's existence and His will is accessible to all men, Jew and gentile alike, and each person is obligated to discover this truth. It is not beyond anybody's reach. When Hashem revealed Himself to Moshe, it was not through a dramatic event, as one might expect. It was through a vision that even a simple person would notice and would inquire about. Hashem's initial revelation to Moshe was in the context of a simple question and a sincere desire to understand the truth.

The Jewish nation is very similar to the burning bush. Throughout history, it has burned and suffered many times but has never been totally consumed. Despite the numerous tragedies that have befallen our people, we always bounce back. Today, many Jews have unfortunately strayed from the path of Torah and mitzvos because they did not have a Torah upbringing. They cannot be faulted for their errors. The one claim that can be made against them is that they see the eternity of the Jewish people, that they are burned but are not consumed, and yet they do not ask the simple question that begs to be asked. They do not wonder what it is about the Jewish people that has allowed them to survive all these tragedies and outlast all their oppressors. If they would sincerely ask this question and seek the truth, Hashem would guide them to the truth of Torah, just as he reached out to Moshe when he asked this same simple question.

תכבד העבודה על האנשים ויעשו בה ואל ישעו בדברי שקר

“Let the work be heavier upon the men and let them do it; and let them not cry out with false words” (5:9)

The midrash (5:22) states that when the Jews were in Egypt, they had scrolls on which the promise that Hashem would take them out of Egypt was written. They would take these scrolls out every Shabbos, which was their day off from the slave labor, and read them in public. They delighted in this reading because it gave them hope that their predicament was not permanent and that they would be redeemed before long. Pharaoh now decided that he was taking away the day off so that they could no longer delight in "falsehood," this hope for salvation. When they would lose the opportunity to contemplate the redemption that they were waiting for, they would lose hope. This reading was a great chizuk for the Jewish people and kept them going throughout the long exile. We also need to look into the pesukim in the Torah regarding the future redemption and draw strength from them. We are required to yearn for the final salvation every day. It is one of the thirteen principles of our faith as recorded by the Rambam. We should also learn from this midrash that Shabbos is the opportune time to use for this inspiration. Many of the zemiros that we sing on Shabbos mention the final redemption. We should use the clarity of mind that Shabbos gives us and reflect upon the ultimate redemption and what it means to us.

R' Moshe Chaim Luzzato (1707-1746, Italy), in his famous mussar sefer Mesillas Yesharim (Perek 2), learns another lesson from this posuk. He writes: "In reality, this is one of the clever devices of the evil inclination - to mount pressure unrelentingly against the hearts of men so as to leave them no leisure to consider and observe the type of life they are leading. For it realizes that if they were to devote even a slight degree of attention to their ways, there is no question but that they would immediately begin to repent of their deeds and that regret would wax in them until they would leave off sinning altogether. It is this consideration which underlay the counsel of the wicked Pharaoh in his statement, 'Let the work be heavier upon them men.' His intention was not merely to deprive them of all leisure so that they would not come to oppose him or plot against him, but he strove to strip their hearts of all thought by means of the enduring, interminable nature of their labor. This is precisely the device that the evil inclination employs against man; for it is a warrior and well versed in deception. One cannot escape it without great wisdom and a broad outlook. This is what the prophet exhorted and said, 'Give heed to your ways.' (Chaggai 1:7)"

The Yetzer Hara wants a person to be constantly working without taking time to think about his purpose in this world. Pharaoh wanted the Jews to be extremely busy so they did not have time to think about anything at all. They would not have time to be concerned with anything other than the work itself. To prevent this from happening to us, the Shulchan Aruch warns that "one should not make his work the main object but secondary, and his Torah study should be primary (OC 156:1)." The Mishna Berura explains that "one must beware of the persuasion of the evil inclination who convinces him that he needs to work throughout the day for material wealth. The important thing is for one to honestly calculate for himself how much he really needs to work and cannot subsist without. Then he can fulfill the precept to make his work secondary and his Torah study his primary pursuit." It is important for a person to be careful not to spend more time at work so that it takes away from his Torah study and his ability to work on himself. A workaholic who cannot pry himself away from his work is only falling prey to the designs of the Yetzer Hara.

Kesharim Baruch College/NYU Parsha Shiur

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